

“What stunning brilliance, what modern veracity:”

Jean Baudrillard’s *America* as a Reluctantly Romantic Document

What happens when a French postmodern theorist visits the land of hyperreality? This may sound like the setup for a bad joke, but this is precisely what happens in Jean Baudrillard’s *America* (1986), an eccentric account of his travels through the US. His attempts to understand the disappearance of meaning within modernity has brought him there, since for him “America is the original version of modernity. We are the dubbed or subtitled version” (82). What he finds is that the Americans live in a simulation, “but they have no language in which to describe it,” thus being “the ideal material for an analysis of all the possible variants of the modern world” (28). It is no conventional work of theory, but rather a highly aestheticized and personal account of Baudrillard’s own impressions.

Perhaps most surprising in this work are its frequent lyrical descriptions of nature — as Geoff Dyer points out in the introduction, it is ironic how a Parisian theorist during his investigations of the hyperreal turns into “a *nature* writer of visionary power” (xi). This raises the question: if Romanticism, as stated by Hinchman and Hinchman, “developed an alternative language and psychology” that could express an existence more meaningful “than one addicted to intense sensory stimuli” (350), are there Romantic undertones in the language Baudrillard developed to describe the simulation? Although the only mention of the word “Romanticism” in the text is a sarcastic remark on “the flabby Romanticism ... that clutter[s] up our free time” (102), the significance of nature as well as of the myriad moments of sudden revelation for Baudrillard’s criticism of (post)modernity, nevertheless appears as an echo of Romantic thought.

In this essay, I will shine the text with considerable force through the projector lens of Romanticism in order to find out whether there are any photonic wavelengths that do not get canceled out in the process, and attempt to discern what image, if any, appears. Throughout, I will argue that there are significant commonalities shared between this text and Romantic thought, and when read with this in mind, Baudrillard's *America* paints a picture of what hyperreality might mean for the future of Romanticism, and conversely, a picture of the significance Romanticism might come to take on in the postmodern era.

Since these concepts are crucial for an understanding of *America*, we first need a definition of Baudrillard's two primary concerns: simulacra and hyperreality. A simulacrum can be described as a copy that does not refer to any original; a sign that has taken on a value of its own, with no relation to what it once signified (Kellner). Accelerated by technological progress and the increased reliance on mass media and communication, the proliferation of simulacra results in a life surrounded by images and symbols that, rather than referring to any external reality, refer only to themselves and to each other (Kellner). Due to the increased presence and influence of these signs over human life, this will in turn affect our perceptions of reality (Kellner). For Baudrillard, the images and signs that have come to dominate our lives no longer bear any relation to reality whatsoever, constituting their own "simulated" reality, or hyperreality — the hyperreal, then, is "more real than real," usurping the place of previous reality, and this state of simulation is what Baudrillard considers as the defining characteristic of the postmodern¹ era (Kellner).

With that out of the way, we need a definition of Romanticism. Romanticism did not emerge in a vacuum — the early Romantics "attacked" the dominant attitude of their age,

¹ It should be noted that, for the purposes of this essay, postmodernity is considered as part of modernity instead of as a departure from it; a "continuation of modern thinking in another mode" (Aylesworth). Although Baudrillard *does* conceive of a break between them (modernity being characterized by production and postmodernity by "social reproduction") (Kellner), interestingly enough, he never uses the term "postmodernity" in *America* — in this text, he only refers to it as "modernity."

namely the enlightenment insistence of reliance on pure reason and scientific progress as sources for perfect understanding of the world, and that these would unquestionably improve the conditions for human life (Berlin 30).

In order to counteract models of thought that seemed to reduce the world's most unique phenomena and experiences to mechanistic processes (Hinchman and Hinchman 336-7), they sought to imbue everything with a profound sense of meaning, creating a worldview capable of treating even the most ordinary things as sources of profound revelation — to “recover the magic of everyday life” meant to “experience the world as though for the first time” (346, 339).

Far from a homogenous movement, what united them was the “attempt to reaffirm wholeness in the face of the divisive tendencies of modern civil society,” a concern with ethical and political dimensions that stood as the basis for the Romantic aesthetic, which emphasized emotion, the mind's inner life, imagination, individuality and its development, and the personal significance of nature and the sublime (Beiser 24-5, 32).

Determining whether Baudrillard shares the ethical and political concerns of the Romantics will require some interpretive work. The prose in *America* is notoriously ambivalent (Coulter), and taking all of its statements at face value carries with it the risk of incoherence. For example, at one time Baudrillard states: “the Americans are not wrong in their idyllic conviction that they are at the centre of the world, the supreme power” (83), and on American culture, he remarks: “we shall never catch them up ... We do not have either the spirit or the audacity for what might be called the zero degree of culture” (84-5), while at the same time, these statements feature in the same chapter as Baudrillard's criticisms of the “deep, insane conviction” of American utopianism and its destructive consequences (83). Reflecting on a passage by G. Faye on the inauthenticity and “‘cool’ Stalinism” of California,

Baudrillard declares it to be “both true, and at the same time, absolutely false” (111-2). Ambivalent statements and self-contradictions permeate the text.

On the other hand, “who wants to be consistent?” asks Oscar Wilde (1). Since, as Gerry Coulter states, *America* can not be approached as a work of realism, it is appropriate to turn towards Wilde’s ideas on realism and “lying.” According to Wilde, lying is a particularly important method for artists to counteract the “monstrous worship of facts” in modern societies (3, 16) — otherwise, he fears: “Beauty will pass from the land” (3). In Wilde’s view, “Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style” (9), a sentiment seemingly shared by Baudrillard when he remarks that the G. Faye passage is only true because “the text itself resembles the hysterical stereotype it confers upon California” (113). Realism, in Wilde’s view, can merely *reproduce* reality and will thus amount to nothing — art should thus use life as its “rough material” (7) but the lie as its method if it wants to change the world in any meaningful way — and if “the lost art of lying” is recovered: “Romance, with her temper of wonder, will return to the land” (17).

For Wilde, the US is the prime example of a society that “worships” facts, a perspective shared by Baudrillard. Wilde’s view of the US is that of a society devoted to “crude commercialism” instead of “high ideals” — founded on a myth of the rejection of lies, it has a “materialising spirit,” thus neglecting imagination and “the poetical side of things” (8). Likewise, Baudrillard refers to the American worldview as “naïve,” and declares: “this is the land of the ‘just as it is’” (28). For both Wilde and Baudrillard, the American worldview is defined by the attitude of everything being precisely what it seems.

There are echoes of Wilde’s sentiment that “it wasn’t always thus” (8) in *America*, as Baudrillard contrasts more “poetical” and dramatic premodern ways of life with the banality of modern lifestyles. “It took great magic on the Indians’ part,” he writes, “and a terribly cruel religion, to exorcize such a theoretical grandeur as the desert’s geological and celestial

occurrence, to live up to such a backdrop ... a human race has to invent sacrifices equal to the natural cataclysmic order that surrounds it” (3-4). However, if a society’s sacrifices equal its surroundings in dramatic force, the sacrificial equivalent in modern society has lost this dramatic dimension: New York’s inhabitants are described as lacking any meaningful activity other than creating “the permanent scenario of the city” — through their constant movement across the cityscape they constitute a human sacrifice merely “to pure circulation” (18, 23). In the subsequent chapter, we find a similar comparison: “Primitives, when in despair, would commit suicide by swimming out to sea until they could swim no longer. The jogger commits suicide by running up and down the beach” (39). In a modern consumerist society there may be a radical ease of life, but some sense of “grandeur” has consequently been replaced by banality; lost in the banality of urban life, the “great magic” and attention to “the poetical side of things” are seemingly nowhere to be found.

For Baudrillard, the disappearance of these values is implicated in a feedback loop along with hyperreality and the prevailing notion of the US being “utopia achieved,” resulting in a society with the cult of “the way of life” as its only remaining system of values (81). While the mechanistic worldview targeted by the Romantics had utopian tendencies — utopia defined by Isaiah Berlin as “all true answers to all serious questions” (22) — there is a difference here in that the Romantics reacted against the attitude that all these questions *could* be answered correctly, while Baudrillard describes a society which believes that these questions *have* been answered. In other words: while the Romantics reacted against an idea, what Baudrillard describes is a feedback loop — the “finished form of the future catastrophe of the social” (5) which he searches for in *America*.

The US, he writes, “lives in perpetual simulation, in a perpetual present of signs” (82). When technological progress leads a society into a radical ease of life (44), and hyperreality supplants the realm of the real, the signs constituting this simulated existence can reinforce

the notion that this ease of living is indeed utopia — after all, these messages no longer require *any* relation to reality since they only need other signs to refer to. In conjunction with a “just as it is” worldview, due to its lack of suspicion, this results in a wide-spread denial of the realities of social suffering, or in Baudrillard’s words: “if utopia has already been achieved, then unhappiness does not exist” (121). “The way of life” keeps on its perpetual circulation like “the record rotating endlessly in the same groove, the cells of a tumour proliferating,” in a society that has “lost the formula for stopping” (39-40). For Baudrillard, the “future catastrophe of the social” is a society with “the deep, insane conviction” that it has realized the dreams of “those very people who suffer the most at its hands” (83) — the “catastrophe” is that of a society where its inhabitants, as a result of this hyperreal arrogance, have lost the capacity to care about other human beings. Thus, Baudrillard ultimately shares the same social concerns and life-affirming ethics found at the core of Romanticism, albeit updated to hyperreal postmodernity.

Naturally, Baudrillard’s proposed solution is not a return to human sacrifice; his solution is an aesthetic one. He shares Wilde’s sentiment that a certain Romantic sensibility has been lost in modern society, and likewise privileges exaggeration and self-contradiction over factual accuracy and realism. This unwieldy aspect of Baudrillard’s prose, when understood as part of his method, serves the purpose of counteracting the modern “worship of facts,” resisting interpretation through a “just as it is” paradigm. Considering this along with his view on the consequences of this worldview, we can conclude that ultimately his aesthetics are informed by his ethical and political concerns, as was the case for the Romantics.

If the worldview targeted by this style is one that ignores “the magic of everyday life,” we can now turn to this aspect of the text, for it is not through analysis of the totality of facts that Baudrillard arrives at insight, but rather through his deliberate treatment of

everything, no matter how ordinary, as a remarkable source of revelation. For instance, an encounter with squirrels prompts contemplation on cultural self-deception: “But, on the lawn, the American squirrels tell us all is well, and that America is kind to animals, to itself, and to the rest of the world,” and the placement of an anti-war sign on the very same lawn, through its incidental symbolism, instills in Baudrillard the sense that “behind these smiling eyes there lurks a cold, ferocious beast stalking us” (50). Likewise, the freeway sign “Right lane must exit” seems to him a “sign of destiny” (55), a destiny that he elucidates upon later: “the have-nots will be condemned to oblivion, to abandonment ... This is ‘must exit’ logic: ‘poor people must exit.’ ... and rightly so, since they show such bad taste as to deviate from the general consensus” (122). In a similar fashion to the recovery of the “magic of everyday life” in Romanticism, Baudrillard perceives anything, no matter how ordinary, as containing extraordinary significance.

However, this sense of wonder as a guide for insight is not limited to merely the smallest of details. During a visit to the Grand Canyon described in the first chapter, Baudrillard has an experience of the sublime:

Geological — and hence metaphysical — monumentality ... sculpted out by wind, water, and ice, dragging you into the whirlpool of time, into the remorseless territory of a slow-motion catastrophe. The very idea of the millions and hundreds of millions of years that were needed to ravage the surface of the earth is a perverse one, since it brings with it an awareness of signs originating, long before man appeared, in a sort of pact of wear and erosion struck between the elements. Among this gigantic heap of signs — purely geological in essence — man will have had no significance. (3)

More specifically, this is an experience of the “thick” sublime, the Romantic and transcendental kind that during an encounter with, for example, a monumental or threatening landscape, interacts with the mind and can “spark a play of ideas,” inviting profound reflection on our place in nature (Shapshay 2, 4). The spatio-temporal vastness of the

landscape provokes in Baudrillard contemplations of its geology, which he relates to his own ideas on semiology. For Baudrillard, the idea of the monumental scale of time involved in the formation of those geological signs is “perverse,” since ultimately: “What is man if the signs that predate him have such power?” (4). These natural signs being significantly more powerful than human-made ones, he naturally makes an attempt at interpreting them.

In order to understand Baudrillard’s turn to nature for insight, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ideas on this matter will prove useful. Nature, according to Emerson, “always wears the colors of the spirit” (14). Due to our reliance on nature in prehistoric times, it has shaped our language and thinking in ways both obvious and unknown — it is thus a “vehicle of thought,” an “interpreter” that through its interplay with our inner lives allows us to better understand ourselves and the world (33-7). Nature’s significance might thus derive from what we bring to it (14), but nonetheless this reflection is only possible due to nature being that which humans have not altered (7).

Emerson delineates a semiotic hierarchy of sorts (32): at the highest level of abstraction, “words are signs of natural facts.” Natural facts, in turn, are “symbols of particular facts,” nature being “the symbol of spirits.” Access to nature’s interpretive faculties can thus be understood as deriving from one’s movement to lower levels of abstraction in this hierarchy during an encounter with nature. When considered in conjunction with Baudrillard’s theories, however, we can discern a higher level of abstraction than Emerson’s “word” level: due to its proliferation of simulacra and subsequent detachment from external reality, a hyperreal society functions at the highest level of abstraction in this hierarchy, one where words are signs of other signs and simulacra, no longer bearing any relation to natural facts.

With this in mind, we can understand Baudrillard’s usage of nature as an interpreter. Continuing his meditations on desert landscapes, he describes them as “places where

humours and fluids become rarefied, where the air is so pure that the influence of the stars descends direct from the constellations,” and he finds in this empty clarity “an even earlier stage than that of anthropology ... a mineralogy ... an inhuman facticity, an aridity that drives out the artificial scruples of culture” (6). Since the deserts lack the overabundance of signs within hyperreality, what they offer is an “inhuman facticity.” Having moved down the levels of abstraction from the level of simulacra, the desert landscapes are places where he can remove himself from the simulation, closer to the realm of natural facts.

And from this vantage point, we can discern some eerie similarities between Baudrillard’s and Emerson’s theories. Nature, Emerson argues, is particularly important as an interpreter due to the “corruption of language” taking place within modernity:

... duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth, the power over nature as an interpreter of the will, is in a degree lost; new imagery ceases to be created, and old words are perverted to stand for things which are not; *a paper currency is employed when there is no bullion in the vaults. In due time, the fraud is manifest*², and words lose all power to stimulate the understanding or the affections. (37-8)

Written nearly one century and a half prior, Emerson’s words on this phenomenon anticipate Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacrum. Indeed, drawing from Baudrillard’s theories, John J. Chung argues that “the rupture of money from gold” resulted in “paper money, formerly the sign of the real (gold)” becoming “the real” (147-9); referring no longer to anything besides itself, it is “a pure abstraction ... its own reality,” a “pure simulacrum in its own hyperreality” (160). For Emerson, “the fraud is manifest” as influential writers privilege these new forms of “truth” over external reality, while still unconsciously appropriating language derived from the fundamental “realness” of nature (38) — a sentiment that anticipates Baudrillard’s ideas on how hyperreality is consolidated through the proliferation of simulacra. However, Emerson declares: “wise men pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible

² Italics for emphasis.

things,” considering anyone who sincerely engages with nature’s interpretive faculties to be “in alliance with truth and God” (39).

While Emerson did not have a fully developed theory of the hyperreal, let alone of its place in his semiotic hierarchy of nature, hyperreality can nevertheless be construed as either a part or result of the “corruption of language” that he identifies. With all of the above in mind, we can thus understand Baudrillard’s approach in this matter as the postmodern equivalent to Emerson’s: a reliance on nature when modern reality seems to be tearing itself apart at the seams; a Romantic form of resistance against this process.

Although he might, according to Emerson’s criteria, be “in allegiance with truth and God,” Baudrillard does not share Emerson’s optimism. The desert-sparked “play of ideas” is something which will remain with Baudrillard during his travels, informing his understanding of American life: “for the mental desert form expands before your very eyes, and this is the purified form of social desertification” (5). One who earnestly uses nature’s interpretive faculties, according to Emerson, will experience that “a material image, more or less luminous, arises in his mind, contemporaneous with every thought” (39), and if there is one image that remains with Baudrillard, it is that of the final chapter’s title: “Desert for Ever.” Finding himself back in Los Angeles, he laments: “This country is without hope. Even its garbage is clean ... life is so liquid, the signs and messages are so liquid ... the hair so blond, and the soft technologies so luxuriant, that a European dreams of death and murder, of suicide motels, of orgies and cannibalism ... to counteract the hyperreality of everything here” (131-2). He then goes on to declare this as “The end of aesthetics” (134).

Let us return now to Baudrillard’s single mention of “Romanticism” in *America*. As he only uses the word once, it can either be construed as a highly significant usage of it, or an insignificant, accidental one. In either case, what Baudrillard describes in the chapter “Utopia Achieved” is essentially the conditions of fundamental Romantic values in America.

In the US, Baudrillard declares, there is “none of the flabby Romanticism and gallo-roman quietude that clutter up our free time”; Americans are “free in their actions,” but they are not “free in spirit”; they “pass in the street without looking at one another,” a “sign of indifference” that he contrasts with European culture, which “produces manners and affectation” (102-3). Americans, in Baudrillard’s view, have come to “a different perception of reality than our own” with a “lack of need for metaphysics” (90). He continues:

All other societies contain within them some heresy or other, some dissidence, some kind of suspicion of reality, the superstitious belief in a force of evil and the possible control of that force by magic, the power of appearances. Here, there is no dissidence, no suspicion ... madness, which with us is subjective, has here become objective ... The fantasmagoria and excess which we locate in the mind and the mental faculties have passed into things themselves. (92-4).

If a society no longer values metaphysics (the simulation taken to be all there is), nor affectation, nor dissidence or suspicion, nor the most unique aspects of the mind’s inner life, it is a society where Romanticism can no longer be possible.

The origin of the crisis of hyperreality, according to Baudrillard, was ultimately a society that “allowed itself to imagine it could create an ideal world from nothing” (83). Exacerbated by techno-scientific progress, the power accumulated through it, and a “just as it is” metaphysics, this crisis and its consequences had, by the time that Baudrillard wrote *America*, in his view become an inescapable feedback loop. The words introducing *America*’s first chapter: “*Caution: Objects in this mirror may be closer than they appear!*” (1) can be read as a warning, albeit a dated one: the state of simulated reality within the US might not be contained there forever. A general acceptance of hyperreality can be the death of Romanticism, and conversely, the death of Romantic values can contribute to a general acceptance of the simulation. In either case, his warning is one with direct implications on the significance that Romantic thought has as a reaction against the divisive tendencies within

modernity. After all, the obverse of the statement introducing this paragraph is that there must be a “something” for a meaningful society to emerge, instead of an overreliance on signs that signify nothing.

We can thus conclude that either by design or lack of it, Baudrillard’s language for describing and resisting the simulation sounds very similar to the language developed by the Romantics. The aesthetics and sentiments in *America* show clear traces of Romanticism, once one scrapes through its ambivalent prose to the core of its ideas. It is unclear to what degree Baudrillard is aware of this — perhaps Romantic values are so foundational in endeavors such as these that it might be impossible to criticize the modern fragmentation of meaning in a highly aestheticized manner without tapping into the well of Romantic thought, where this reaction lies as the bedrock. Baudrillard’s *America* thus stands as a testament to how Romantic thought has lingered on even into the postmodern era — still visible underneath the layers of irony, fragmentation and detachment that characterize all things postmodern. It serves both as a warning of the potential death of Romanticism in hyperreal cultures, as well as a potential blueprint for how to appropriate Romantic thought in order to regain one’s bearings in a world that seems to grow all the less “real,” a world that seems to be (to misquote Thomas Pynchon) “a-falling away from what is human.”

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