

**THE PERFECTION OF GEOGRAPHY AS AN
AESTHETIC OF DISAPPEARANCE:
BAUDRILLARD'S AMERICA**

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THE PERFECTION OF GEOGRAPHY AS AN AESTHETIC OF DISAPPEARANCE:
BAUDRILLARD'S AMERICA.

We are agreed: Jean Baudrillard has perfected geography. For us, America (Baudrillard, 1988) is the first and last book of geography. Geography is now complete: nothing is missing, nothing is out of place, nothing is left to do. We can say, with absolute precision, that the beginning of America ends (in) the wake of deconstruction. The anonymous and thoroughly individuated page X, as it reiterates, parodies and subsequently abandons the thematic and chiasitic design of deconstruction [X], and with its frontispiece of the aesthetic of disappearance par excellence (the acceleration of desert freeway into the infinitely receding horizon of abstract speed and absolute deterritorialization: point X), prefaces and pre-empts the first division of America: VANISHING POINT. All of this, however, will have been completely misunderstood by the would-be reader of America. Indeed, before one even encounters the first word which would open the book that is America, (an opening which would say to the reader: 'Come. Begin your reading right here, with the word: "Nostalgia".'), everything which will have been written and presented in the name of geography will have been withdrawn and retracted through the vanishing points of page X. In other words, America can only be encountered through the flat, superficial, barren and perfectly smooth portals of page X which transpose America and its entire contextualization into the hollowed porosity of abstract speed. America is nothing but the distension of page X as it reterritorializes and saturates the

entire space of geography. There's only one, but this one is neither the one as subject nor the one as object. It is the one of pure desubjectification: nothing but the anonymous name X.

America is the first and last book of geography. Through an affirmation of page X, Baudrillard has enabled us to encounter the definitive geographical text. America is the 'Writing Degree Zero' of geo (earth) graphein (writing). It lays claim to the vanishing point of absolute zero (of what Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, call 'motionless voyaging'). In the wake of deconstruction everything withdraws and retracts (and re-traces) into senseless erasure: XXXX. And through the fascination of this senseless repetition we will have experienced the smooth space of America, of geography, of earthwriting, of X. Henceforth, there is nothing outside page X. However, it would be erroneous to conclude that geography is only page X: that the word laden pages 1 to 129 count for nothing (except, that is, for marking time: the dead space of Kroker and Cook, 1988). To the contrary, page X must be understood as the (w)hole machination of pure circulation: nothing but movement; nothing but flux. In other words, page X is not a single page. It is not autonomous, self-contained or free-standing. Rather, it is the relationship between the anonymous page X and the word laden pages which interests us. Page X is a supplement written to the n-1th dimension. Or again: page X subtracts the written text from geography. Page X, the vanishing point of geography, and the Degree Zero of geographein, exists and functions only insofar as it withdraws meaning and reference into the pure circulation of a

smooth space.

America, through the incessant affirmation of the senseless repetition of page X, literally perfects the writing of geography. The perfect geography will not have been presented through the accumulation of words, but to the contrary, it will have been composed through the eternal recurrence of their adsorption onto the asignifying page X. Quite simply, the (w)hole machination of page X transposes the onto-theological idealism of re-presentation into the desubjectified materialism of motionless voyaging. In short, there will have been an infinite array of route-ways to travel. Consequently, those who wish to read America will miss everything and experience nothing (henceforth, a slogan: DO NOT READ THIS BOOK). By contrast, those who wish to travel America will encounter the one and only page of a truly perfect geography. But this page belongs neither to Baudrillard, nor to America. It is not their page. To the contrary, it is forever anonymous, irrevocably open and therefore available to all. Baudrillard and America merely ex-ap-propriae it.

What then makes Baudrillard's America the perfection of geography? Quite simply, it is because he willingly sacrifices everything he writes in deference to, and in affirmation of, all manner of vanishing points and deterritorializing portals which mark out the asignifying surface of the eternally recurring page X. In addition, Baudrillard also knows that this sacrifice will yield no return. Indeed, it is precisely this profligacy which

Baudrillard celebrates. Finally, it is no coincidence that the first word of the written text is 'Nostalgia' since it is this word which underpins all of those discourses which are obsessed with the possibility and fear of loss. In a perfect geography nothing would be missing, nothing would be out of place: UTOPIA ACHIEVED. In Cool Memories (1990, p. 29) Baudrillard reflects on his perfection of Writing the Degree Zero of geography: 'The real joy of writing lies in the opportunity of being able to sacrifice a whole chapter for a single sentence, a complete sentence for a single word, to sacrifice everything for an artificial effect or an acceleration into the void.' The perfection of geography can only come about through the disappearance of the written (and therefore the readable) text on the anonymous page X. America is not X, but it is, nevertheless, the first piece of geography which has self-consciously organised itself according to a general economy, an unrestricted aesthetic of disappearance. In America, everything takes place in the wake of deconstruction's senseless erasure. This is why we are agreed: America has perfected the Will to Disappearance. Indeed, it is always the reader who is left abandoned on the receding, asignifying surface of a Baudrillardian text: the meaning has gone. The traveller, by contrast, simply smiles and moves on.

X

ASTRAL AMERICA; MYSTIC TRANSPORTATION; circulation; flux; and yet '[t]he more general problem is one of an absence of difference' (p.47): America. One of us - unsuccessfully, it should be said - attempted to re-present the book, in an extreme, delirious

panic reading (Kroker, Kroker and Cook, 1988; Gane, 1991,11). Why not select, dissect, illustrate, stitch together America - with the urban geography of New York, perhaps? But isn't this still Frankenstein? (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 171)

X

New York.

Aeronautic missionary of the silent majorities, Baudrillard invents objective irony as New York invents itself: city as object at the centre of the world; city that is heir to all other cities at once.

In years to come other cities will stretch out horizontally and will be non-urban (Los Angeles). After that they will bury themselves in the ground and will no longer even have names. New York is the final fling of baroque verticality, centrifugal excentricity, before the horizontal dismantling arrives, and the subterranean implosion that will follow. Every special effect can be found here, from sublime verticality to decay on the ground, all the special effects of the mixing of races and empires. This is the fourth dimension of the city, at the centre of the world.

Polis without police. Urbanisation has reached such a pitch that there is no longer any need to express it or give it a political character. A magical sensation of contiguity and attraction for an artificial centrality - this is what makes it a self-attracting universe. This centrality and excentricity can only

create a crazed sense of its own end, which the whole city collectively cultivates in its technical frenzy for the vertical, its constant acceleration of the banal, the liveliness of its faces, whether happy or wretched, and the insolence of its sacrifice of humans to pure circulation. Such is the whirl of the city, so great its centrifugal force. It really is the end-of-the-world show. Why do people live in New York? The last survivors at the last party.

The New York Marathon as death drive. Delivering the message of a catastrophe for the human race. The marathon is a form of demonstrative suicide, suicide as advertising: it is running to show you are capable of getting every last drop of energy out of yourself, to prove it...to prove what? That you are capable of finishing. 'I DID IT!' The slogan of a new form of advertising activity, of autistic performance, a pure and empty form, a challenge to one's own self that has replaced the Promethean ecstasy of competition, effort, and success. To prove it... Graffiti carry the same message. They simply say: I'm so-and-so and I exist! They are free publicity for existence.

In Europe, the street only lives in sudden surges, in historic moments of revolution and barricades. The American street has not, perhaps, known these historic moments, but it is always turbulent, lively, kinetic and cinematic, like the country itself, where the specifically historical and political counts for little, but where change, spurred by technology, racial differences, or the media, assumes virulent forms: its violence

is the very violence of the way of life. Nothing could be more intense, electrifying, turbulent, and vital than the streets of New York. New York's violence is not a violence of social relations but of all relations, and it's exponential. You are wreathed in the general energy of the place - what you are part of here is not the lugubrious spectacle of change, as you find it in Europe, but the aesthetic form of a mutation.

In such a space the pure architectural object is born, an object beyond the control of architects, which roundly repudiates the city and its uses, repudiates the interests of the collectivity and individuals and persists in its own madness. In Europe, the cities do not have enough space, or rather space is deemed public and bears all the marks of the public arena, which forbids you to cross it or wander around it as if it were a desert. We in Europe possess the art of thinking, of analysing things and reflecting on them. No one disputes our historical subtlety and conceptual imagination. But the resounding truths, the realities of genuinely great moment today are to be found along the Pacific seaboard or in Manhattan. We are a desperately long way behind the stupidity and mutational character, the naive extravagance and the social, racial, moral, morphological and architectural excentricity of their society.

Clouds spoil our European skies. Compared with the immense skies of America and their thick clouds, our little fleecy skies and little fleecy clouds resemble our fleecy thoughts, which are never thoughts of wide open spaces... Europe has never been a continent. You can see that by its skies. As soon as you set

foot in America, you feel the presence of an entire continent - space there is the very form of thought.

New York: it has about it something of the dawning of the universe. Perhaps because the entire world continues to dream of New York, even as New York dominates and exploits it. New York redoubles New York, New York is the redoubling of New York.

Space and the Spirit of Fiction.

America's final cinematic hyperreality, in its perfection of modernity (Marx, Baudrillard), cannot be captured or restrained within the pages of America. A paradox: Can pornogeographical re-pre-sentation seek to captivate and bind the culture of an obscene society? What happens to the vanishing point in the transition from scene/representation to the ob-scene character of hyperspace?

It is only via a politics of speed - forcing things, objects, time, by objective ironic means, to come into being - that the end of the world can be brought into view. 'Deterritorialisation begins with the disconnection of night and day ... this already marks the end of our space-time, that same enchanted reality which will be that of the West' (p.126-7).

Baudrillard follows a challenge: How to revel/ravel with(in) a culture which is at once virulent, anorexic, indifferent, apocalyptic? Attempting to broach the textuality of a constantly circulating space, where metaphor has imploded,

where simulation produces an effect that cannot be countered without an accelerated en-counter.

Many will have rejected, censored, burned Baudrillard's book before the beginnings of a reading. Unwilling to follow the lead of the silent majorities, unable to confirm the disappearance of the social, the implosive existence of the Fourth World - 'the world without the right to surface' (p.112). Such a burning is far from sacrificial. It belongs not to a general economy...

... an infinite panning shot of the desert (N.B. 'no longer a landscape' [p.127]) closes America with an opening: 'a challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference points' (p.123). And so we are seduced and agreed: Jean Baudrillard has perfected geography. Geography is now complete: nothing is missing, nothing is out of place, nothing is left to do. The Writing Degree Zero of geographie ends in the desert: 'Its definition is absolute, its frontiers initiatory, its ridges steep, its contours cruel. It is a place of signs of an impervious necessity, and ineluctable necessity - but void of all meaning, arbitrary and inhuman, and one crosses it without deciphering them' (p.127). An aesthetic of disappearance into a fractal geography of infinite possibility. Hence, the motto of all future geography: DESERT FOR EVER! Everything is missing, everything is out of place, everything is left to do!

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