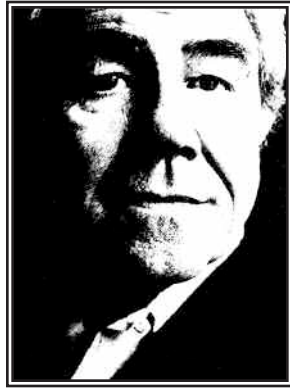


America After Utopia



JEAN BAUDRILLARD

*The French social critic and lapsed sociologist Jean Baudrillard, who died in 2007, is author of the highly acclaimed *America and Cool Memories*. One of the more poignant observers of America since his compatriot Alexis de Tocqueville roamed these lands, Baudrillard's insights, in the manner of the parochial universalism of Parisian post-Marxist intellectuals, dazzle somewhere between the brilliant and impenetrable. Back in 1990, I sat down with him in the haute tucky Royal Palace motel in Los Angeles, which Baudrillard claimed was his favorite city. For him, LA was the closest thing to a center in this heterogeneous, ex-centric world.*

NATHAN GARDELS | You have called America the “primitive society of the future.” What do you mean?

JEAN BAUDRILLARD | Like primitive societies of the past, America doesn't have a past. It has no “ancestral territory”—speaking not of land but of symbolic terrain—that has accumulated centuries of meaning and cultivated principles of truth. In short, America has no roots except in the future and is, therefore, nothing but what it imagines. It is perpetual simulation. America has no context other than what it, concretely, is. From a historical standpoint, America is weightless...

GARDELS | ...the “lightness of being” on a grand scale!

BAUDRILLARD | Exactly. Like primitive societies, America lives primarily in nature and the unconscious realm of myths and symbols. America is only nature and artificiality, space plus a spirit of fiction. There is no self-reflexive, self-mirroring level, the civilizing level of unhappy consciousness, which comes with history and which places a distance between the symbolic and the real. It is this lack of distance and incapacity for ironic reflection that accounts for America's naïve and primitive qualities. Without knowledge of irony, the imaginary and the real are fused and

indistinguishable. Disneyland is authentic! Television and movies are real! America has created an ideal world from nothing and consecrated it in the cinema.

GARDELS | This absence of critical distance is also reflected, wouldn't you say, in the aesthetic nausea of the built environment in Los Angeles—the free-ways, the commercial strips with their signs competing for the attention of mobile consumers, with each building architecturally unrelated to the others?

BAUDRILLARD | Los Angeles is beyond aesthetics. It is transaesthetical, like a desert. Culture exists in a wild state where all aesthetics are sacrificed in a process of literal transcription of dreams into reality. In the car ads, for example, there is no difference between the car and happiness. In the mind of the consumer, the material reality of the car and the metaphysical concept of happiness and contentment are identical. A car is happiness. Who could ask for anything more than a new Toyota? Aesthetics requires context, and in America, the only context is its own mythic banality.

In Europe, we philosophize on the end of lots of things. It is in America, though, that we should look for the ideal type of the end of our culture.

GARDELS | The medium is the myth, so to speak. How, then, is America “utopia achieved,” as you have put it?

BAUDRILLARD | Well, what did the European philosophers expect utopia to look like? America is, in concrete form, the traumatic consequence of European dreams. America is the original version of modernity, the weightless paradise of liberation from the past. Europe is the dubbed or subtitled version. What is only thought in Europe becomes reality in America. It is we who imagine that everything culminates in transcendence, and that nothing exists that hasn't been conceptualized. Americans are not interested in conceptualizing reality but in materializing ideas.

Americans inhabit true fiction by giving it the form of reality, while we are condemned to the imaginary and to nostalgia for the future. We anticipate reality by imagining it or flee from it by idealizing it. Americans merely radically implement everything we think about, from mass egalitarianism to individualism to freedom to fantasy. In so doing, “utopia achieved” has transformed into the anti-utopia of unreason, weightlessness, value neutralism, indifference, the indeterminacy of language, and the death of culture. Having hyperrealized modernity, the hyperreality turns against modernity.

America was “deconstructed” from the outset because of its original inauthenticity—the utopian moral sphere has always been your primal scene, while history and politics remain ours. California, in particular, is the world center of the inauthentic. As the scene of anti-utopia, its vitality is the mirror of our decadence.

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GARDELS | The vitality of Los Angeles springs from weightlessness. The cultural indifference is precisely what enables the new wave of Third World immigrants, who have left their ancestral territory, to build their own particular utopia inside the anti-utopia. I'm thinking here not only of the Mexican and Korean immigrants, but especially of the Vietnamese boat people who have reconstructed a mini-Saigon in the shadow of Disneyland's fake Matterhorn.

BAUDRILLARD | These emigrants from real space to hyperreality reinforce the American model. They are complex hybrids of origin and artificiality. In this powerful simulacrum of California, they are giving the form of reality to their fiction.

GARDELS | In Los Angeles, it is possible to touch the living, breathing hybridity and fragmentation of cultural life, the deconstructed and decentered diaspora so eloquently theorized upon in Parisian salons. But tell me this. What accounts for Europe's craving American inauthenticity? We export it by the boatload. Our consecrated fictional realism plays in most Parisian movie theaters, McDonald's graces the Champs Elysee, and Disneyland has opened just outside Paris. How can simulated inauthenticity be so appealing?

BAUDRILLARD | We are both attracted to American mass culture and repelled by it. We still have enough distance to be fascinated by, rather than inhabit, its factitiousness.

But the resistance is fragile. We don't have anything to oppose to this cultural contamination. Culturally and philosophically exhausted, we remain unable to transform our past into living values for the present. Our cultural antibodies have acquired an immune deficiency, and can't resist the virus.

GARDELS | Isn't the name of that immune deficiency syndrome "indifference"? Marcel Duchamp noted long ago that the ultimate face of modernity was this "freedom of indifference."

BAUDRILLARD | In Europe at least, a sense of loss still accompanies indifference. But in America, indifference is already anachronistic. The strategy of indifference was there from the start. In fact, America's genius, as Alexis de Tocqueville noted in both horror and admiration, was the irrepressible abolition of difference. Sheltered from the vicissitudes of history far from its shores, America was indifferent to the world. Inside its boundaries, the radical form of its indifference became the toleration of any and all differences.

In the end, this is what the universal cultural problematic of deconstruction is all about. Without a center, without a transcendent context, how do you value differences?

Thanks to the hegemony of the West, indifference has become a universal fact. In the future, power will belong to those peoples with no origins and no authenticity. It

will belong to those who, like America from the beginning, can achieve “deterritorialization” and weightlessness and figure out how to exploit the situation to the full extent. Whether we like it or not, the future has shifted away from any historical center toward artificial satellites.

GARDELS | Your vision of the world sounds like Salman Rushdie’s: a world of uprooted migrants, fragments, debris of the soul, bits and pieces from here and there—all with a hole inside, a “vacancy in the vital inner chamber.” In your terms, weightless, indifferent satellites floating unattached about the planet. Rushdie’s vision, however, was challenged from the quarters of the centered absolute, the ultimate face of the antimodern: Khomeini.

BAUDRILLARD | I agree with Rushdie that the whole world is implicated in this fragmentation and uprootedness, including China and Russia. There is one exception: Islam. It stands as a challenge to the radical indifference sweeping the world.

GARDELS | It seems that all these weightless fragments are juxtaposed, living side by side in ontological uncertainty without mixing...

BAUDRILLARD | ...and that is unstable. Perhaps that is why the West is so weak and vulnerable in the face of the certitudes of radical Islam.

In a way, radical Islam is the revenge of modern history. The West inoculated them with our virus, and now they are immune to us. So now, people such as Ayatollah Khomeini can contaminate the whole Western world with terrorism and death threats.

Khomeini’s question about the West is perhaps also ours: What happens after the great orgy of freedom that has left us all indifferent?

GARDELS | In effect, what comes after utopia?

BAUDRILLARD | Perhaps reversibility. The march of history has broken from its forward path. It seems anything can happen beyond this point, good or bad. We can’t live with the past, but neither do we have a project. Every day is rich with unpredictable happenings: terrorism, AIDS, electronic viruses... the course is uncharted.

GARDELS | Man’s fate has checked into purgatory.

BAUDRILLARD | Well, Europe, at least, still survives in the purgatory of simulation. We still harbor a vague regret over the loss of origins and are wary of the inauthentic. Americans are in the paradise of simulation, long comfortable with weightlessness as a way of life.

For Europe, there may be no way from purgatory to paradise. And that could be our salvation.

