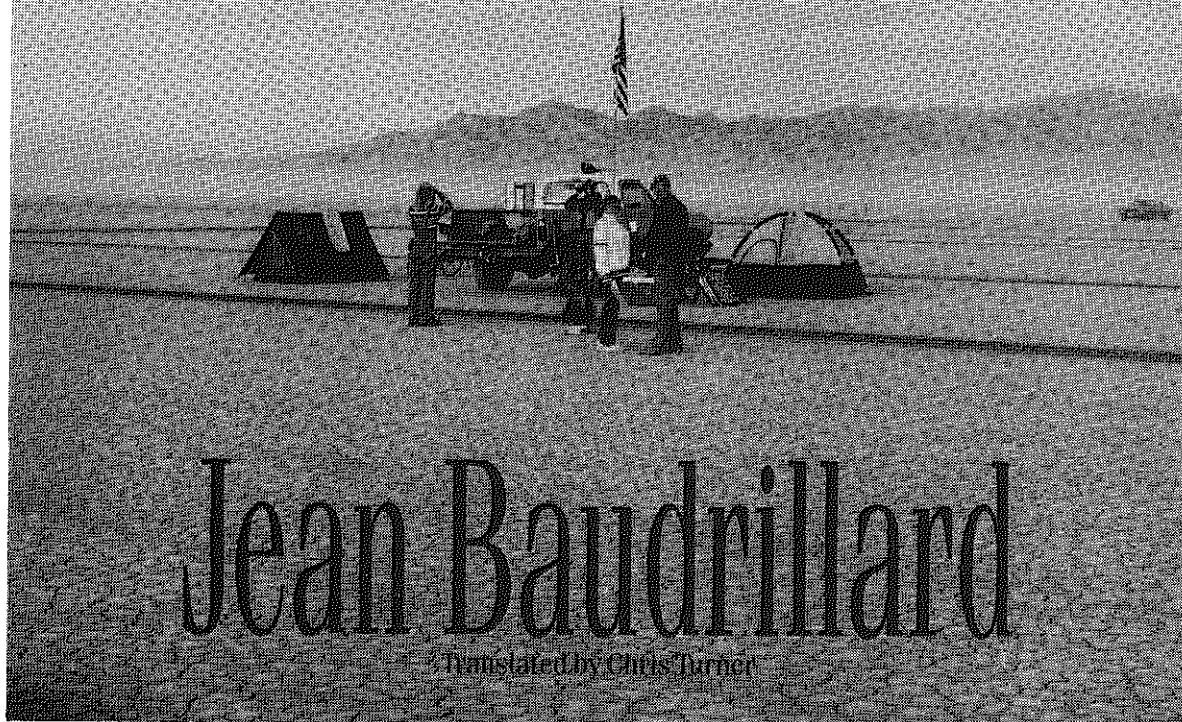


AMERICA



Adventures in the Dromosphere

Gary Genosko

America
by Jean Baudrillard
translated by Chris Turner
London: Verso, 1988, 129 pp.

Amérique
by Jean Baudrillard
Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1986, 249 pp.

Cool Memories 1980-1985
by Jean Baudrillard
Paris: Galilée, 1987, 290 pp.

In his collection of aphoristic reflections, *Cool Memories*, Baudrillard remarks of *America*:

For *America*, a single method: given a certain number of fragments, notes and accounts put together over a fixed period of time, it must have in it a solution which integrates them all, without

addition or subtraction, in a necessary ensemble, the very necessity which has everywhere attended, just below the surface, to their collection. To hypothesize that this material is the singular and the best, because it organises itself secretly according to the same thought; that everything which has been thought according to the same obsession has a sense and there is inevitably one solution to the problem of its reconstitution. The study begins with the certainty that everything is already there, and that it is enough to find in it the key [my translation].

There it is, the key: Baudrillard tells us that there is one to be found and, in a roundabout way, what it might be. In doing so he has already intimated a great deal about a book which has a secret organisation, since the secret is not the key to something other or deeper than itself. Freud, for example, enjoyed his "keys," his picklocks and skeleton keys, and used them to open the phantasies and trace the desires of his analysands.

On the other hand, Baudrillard's key designates that there is a secret in *America* that lends itself to neither interpretation nor communication. The key to the book is that it contains a secret but the secret reveals nothing since it is not a cache. Psychoanalysis will have none of this, since in its will to make desire show itself, it denies the pure joy, the wanton giddiness of the secret. As a secret, *America* is undecipherable, and that is its charm. The secret challenges the hermeneut who is eager for knowledge and willing to produce it at all costs. Baudrillard is not so desperate: a salacious glance is superior to a formal introduction.

America has been reviewed widely in America, and elsewhere, to dubious critical acclaim (see J. Hoberman's frolicking review in the *Voice Literary Supplement*, March 1989). It has not been picked clean by the culture vultures of the highbrow review pages, despite their best efforts to peck away at it (see Robert Hughes on Baudrillard's jargon in *The New York Review*, 1 June 1989).

If *America* is patchy, then *Cool Memories* is a scrap heap. In these postmodern times a bundle of snippets is supposed to be enough to keep us going, and it is, to be sure, if one relinquishes the heavy burden of cracking the kernel of truth and, instead, leaves the veil over truth, the secret under cover. Keep this in mind: seduction requires a secret. Even one who has put a secret into circulation for one's personal delectation can do no more than succumb to the pleasure of a tired and lascivious absence.

While we might marvel at Jacques Derrida's laundering of Nietzsche's fragment "I have forgotten my umbrella," Baudrillard's final cool memory, "*Ce journal est une matrice subtile de paresse*" (This journal is a subtle matrix of idleness), might also be put through the wringer as that which summarises a collection which has no total effect, nor even purports to have one, but for that reason cannot be

resisted. Baudrillard's final memory is a parting shot born of the idleness which it describes: "Today, Monday [1985]. I've written all the articles, responded to all the letters (finally!), passed the thesis and abandoned America — today, for the first time in ten years, five years perhaps, I realise that I no longer have anything to do" [my translation]. *Cool Memories* is the product of a clean-up operation. What was collected became a journal, a literary recycling project, but one which was well-earned.

Look at *America*. It seems to beckon a coffee table on which to sit and shine like any fleeting sign of the cool, drawing one near, away from the crystals and Batman paraphernalia. Such is the work of a so-called enigmatic commodity. It even has photographs, unlike the French edition, which suggests a weak genealogical link with Robert Frank's *The Americans* and even Laurie Anderson's performance piece "Americans on the Move."

What does *America* "conceal" about its origins? It was published by a collective which has diligently mapped the distortions of the postindustrial market society in the pages of the *New Left Review* and given us so many "critical books for critical people," as its copy reads. It's Verso, *né* New Left Books. One can only imagine the debates on the production of commodities which gave way to the publication of an expensive, pretty volume of *Amérique* in translation. One may go from Ralph Miliband to Baudrillard but there is no way back again.

Now, Verso didn't mask the fact that it published *America*. No, in what was a shrewd marketing decision, Verso released a book which has titillated hip consumers. Verso knows a fetish object when it sees one and that the market for post-structuralism in translation is hot. For Baudrillard, as we can imagine, all of this makes the kind of ironic sense that Verso has unwittingly provoked in a moment of unfettered ecstasy: it's all over with the commodity. *America* simply doesn't have anything inside its secret to reveal. The book has taken its revenge on Verso by showing itself to be illegible. It is an object which hides nothing and does nothing but circulate. With *America*, Verso has surpassed itself, let itself be seduced by what remains of the political economy it has so ardently critiqued. We have witnessed, then, with no hard feelings, the dénouement of critical thought at its own hands.

There is, of course, another side to the matter. Wasn't it about time that someone on the left answered Stuart Hall's repeated wake-up calls to the style of the present? Yes, of course, but there isn't any left left in the work of Baudrillard, for, as he has said, the left arrived too late, at least in France, but still in time to manage the implosion of the social or what is called socialism. Thus, we have *America*, and the left, stirred by its commemoration compulsion, performs plastic surgery on history so as to ensure that there will be no more revolutions other than simulated ones.

America begins with "Vanishing Point," the point of disappearance in an ob-scene of pure traveling composed by means of a

gearshift behind the wheel of a Chrysler. In San Antonio, Salt Lake City, Alamo-gordo and Torrey Canyon, Baudrillard disappears into the radical indifference of the American desert of affectless signs. In America, culture, as nature, is a seismic form: an infinite, iconic proliferation of cracks and rifts. Baudrillard ponders the "sights" (El Alamo, Bonneville, White Sands and the Salk Institute) from the whore of the desert in the south, Las Vegas, to the extraterrestrial Salt Lake City in the north, where all of the statues of Christ resemble Björn Borg.

"Vanishing Point" evokes the work of Paul Virilio, whom Baudrillard works with on the editorial committee of *Transverses*, a quarterly review published through the Centre George Pompidou in Paris. In order to realise Virilio's idea of the aesthetics of disappearance, Baudrillard boards an interpretive vehicle which carries him to a centrifugal, ex-centric limit of sorts; just as a supersonic jet may be said to punch a hole in the sound barrier, Baudrillard reaches a point of no return where his theoretical circulation (he does not move at the speed of sound) produces an absence which absorbs him. This poetics of space gives way to the desert of time, an amnesic zone where all sense and spatial reference falls away. In this dromosphere, a voyage is described by the relation of the speed of a moving object to the speed of sound in the medium through which it travels, while the speed of sound is proportional to the square root of the absolute temperature. The Mach regime, then, is both Baudrillard's and Virilio's perceptual prothesis.

Turner's decision to translate "*l'Amérique sidérale*" as "astral America," as opposed to *sidereal* America, was an unfortunate one since he thereby obscured the Virilian trope around which Baudrillard's work turns. A sidereal day is some three minutes 56 seconds shorter than a usual 24-hour day; by the same token, the distance between two points (departure-arrival) appears to be shorter than it is as the speed at which one travels increases. Such is the luxury of the Concorde, for instance, and Baudrillard would be pleased to know that during the Canadian National Exhibition's air show in Toronto in 1987, British Airways offered flights on the Concorde, "to nowhere at twice the speed of sound." *Sidereal* does not only signify America's relation to the stars, the stars and bars, lone and Hollywood stars, but sets up Virilio's work as Baudrillard's intertextual referent. "Vanishing Point" is a very abstract trip indeed. Baudrillard sets his pace at a sidereal rate, just as the driving apparatus of a telescope is set at a certain rate so as to track a star. In Baudrillard's case, however, the star has just imploded, and appropriately so.

Although Baudrillard seems to be in a hurry on his way to nowhere, in the second section of *America* he touches down in "New York." Turner's translation gets off to a shaky start since at the outset Baudrillard refers to himself as "*Missionnaire aéronautique des majorités silencieuses et des stratégies fatales*," while Turner for some reason gives us "Aeronautic missionary of the silent

majorities," thus retaining the former mention of Baudrillard's *A L'Ombre Des Majorités Silencieuses* (1978) but not the latter reference to his *Les Stratégies Fatales* (1983). Moreover, in the same paragraph, "*la douceur verticale des gratte-ciel*" becomes "the steeping gentleness of skyscrapers," a rather overblown rendition which includes the questionable adjective "steeping."

The silent majority or nebulous mass no longer operates as a political or sociological referent, thinks Baudrillard, since it absorbs everything without a trace and cannot be said to offer anything in return. Although Baudrillard has written that one cannot speak in the name of this mass, he seems to want to do so in "New York," in spite of himself. However, if Jean-François Lyotard can refer to "Adorno as Devil," we may think of "Baudrillard as Nixon" in order to find the impetus of this desire.

In his "Pursuit of Peace" address of 3 November 1969, Richard M. Nixon spoke out against a vocal minority, who opposed the war in Vietnam, in favour of the patriotic will and reason of an American majority: "And so tonight — to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans — I ask for your support." Like Nixon, Baudrillard wants to provoke this mass, and, in both instances, major, ironic "victories" may be cited: a second term for Nixon and a splash in the North American art and academic markets for Baudrillard.

Nixon has his Watergate, while Baudrillard has his *America*, a book which has engendered many enthusiastic misappropriations and highly selective, even reductive, versions of what is known of his *œuvre*.

Nixon had his dirty little secrets; Baudrillard just has the secret. Nixon had his opening to China; Baudrillard thinks that Vietnam was the occasion for China's apprenticeship to the world stage. For both Nixon and Baudrillard, America won the war but not the actual fighting. *Apocalypse Now*, Baudrillard adds, was part of the spoils.

In 1946, Sartre exclaimed, "*J'aime New York*." During the 1970s, "I love New York" became the catch phrase that one could use to describe New York, the city and the state: a simple, empty loyalty. One might love the city, but Baudrillard thinks that there is no love among those who live in it: "Why do people live in New York? There is no relationship between them." There is no place for the "couple" in New York: "Only tribes, gangs, mafia families, secret societies, and perverse communities can survive, not couples. This is the anti-Ark." It is not only the solitude of the inhabitants that impresses Baudrillard but the fetishistic delight that each New Yorker takes in inconsequential performances of self-affirmation (running the New York marathon, covering subway cars with *noms de plume*).

Baudrillard's New York owes much to Sinatra: "If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere," the crooner crooned, a precursor to Baudrillard's phrase "I did it!" as the height of "autistic performance ... a challenge to one's self." *America* gives us the New York we have already absorbed through the spectral media images that

populate our dreams of the city at the centre of the world.

In "Astral America," *America and Cool Memories* may be seen to reflect one another like two funhouse mirrors standing face-to-face. One finds this frantic referentiality in Baudrillard's remarks in *America* on the film *The Last Day*, and in *Cool Memories* on the film *The Day After*: the former failed to make the nuclear scene credible, and, although the latter sought to pit dissuasion against dissuasion, it only proved that we have already been irradiated. Again, in *America* Baudrillard refers to Boy George, Michael Jackson and David Bowie as exceptional figures at the ground zero of masculinity and femininity; Michael Jackson, solitary mutant, god-child, prosthetic idol, appears in *Cool Memories* as the one, "better than Christ," who would set us free from race and sex. There are more familiar memories in *America*: whereas in *La Gauche divine*, Baudrillard's political chronicle of the left in France from 1977-1984, "the left is the monster from *Alien*," in *America* the laughter on American television is the same monster. But in *Cool Memories* it is J.R. Ewing who is the emblem of the tribal culture of *Dallas*, in a country which "is the only remaining primitive society."

Like Fredric Jameson, Baudrillard also gets lost in the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles. One can image Jameson, Baudrillard, Terry Eagleton and Mike Davis wandering through this labyrinthine palace, passing one another now and then, "without any two pairs of eyes ever meeting," until their delirious paths bring them to the rotating cocktail bar where they prepare to face the primal scene: the desert which is America. For Henry Miller in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, the "desert rat" responds to a question about where the desert begins by saying: "Why, as far as I can make out, it's all desert, all this country." Baudrillard is a desert rat. His hunting grounds are "the deserts, the mountains, the freeways, the Safeways, the ghost towns, or the downtowns, not lectures at the university. I know the deserts, their deserts, better than they do." All one needs to understand America is a car; well, and a whiskey, as Baudrillard adds tactfully.

With the "Utopia Achieved" that is America in all of its sterling banality, we find the following admission:

Banality, lack of culture, and vulgarity do not have the same meaning here as they have in Europe. Or perhaps this is merely the crazy notion of a European, a fascination with an unreal America. Perhaps Americans are quite simply vulgar, and this meta-vulgarity is merely something I have dreamt up. Who knows? [Turner does not note that this phrase is in English in the original and italicised, so as to be doubly marked as meta-banal.] But I am inclined to suggest, in time-honoured fashion, that you have nothing to lose if I am wrong and everything to gain if I am right.

After *America*, Baudrillard will ultimately question the reason for being European

and describe the double negative transference to which, on the one hand, American intellectuals give themselves over by casting nostalgic glances towards Europe and, on the other hand, the same relation which Europeans cultivate in "casting longing eyes towards all-out [American] modernity;" he may simply be wrong. In reading Baudrillard, one must be constantly on the lookout for such qualifiers and thus neither attempt to rigidly positivise his "theory" nor to treat it as poetry, though he has translated (Brecht) and written (his own *L'Ange de stuc*) that too. We may be in the era of the reign of simulation, but we are also witnessing the reign of the qualifier: "perhaps," "as if," "who knows?" The hedge is an insidious post-modern form.

In terms of all the trappings of "imperialism," America may have lost some ground, Baudrillard maintains in "The End of US Power?" but at least it has *Dallas*. It is not that America is running on empty. Rather, it's running on hysterical power: "the process whereby something continues to develop by inertia, whereby an effect continues even when its cause has disappeared." As much as Baudrillard is prepared to graft explanations culled from physics onto social and political phenomena, he prefers, as we may see in abundance in *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, *Les stratégies fatales* and *Cool Memories*, explanations which are pataphysical.

"In a more comic vein [the hysterical system functions], like the cyclist in Jarry's *Supernale*, who has died of exhaustion on

the incredible trip across Siberia, but who carries on pedaling and propelling the Great Machine, his rigor mortis transformed into motive power." America is like Jarry's cyclist; the obese system of modernity resembles Pa Ubu; California hums with a pataphysical ambience. The sceptre of the French playwright (a plunger) haunts Baudrillard's texts, and the imaginary science of pataphysics is perhaps the kinklet of his qualifiers. On the matter of this plunger, we see how it might have come in handy in *Cool Memories* where Baudrillard tells us that "*Mon lavabo est bouché*" (My sink is plugged).

America ends with "Desert For Ever," an epiphany on the pure forms of the desert and Los Angeles. All of Baudrillard's "hypers" gather here: the hyperreal or what is more real than the real, the tissue of L.A.; hypertrophy, the excessive growth of the urban tissue modeled on a cancerous cell; hypertelia, the delirious growth of useless appendages (suburbs, freeways) in the runaway horizontality of the city; hyperspace, a kind of science fictional zone where meaning, origins and reference points disappear as one "jumps" into it, as in a spaceship; the hyperplastic spiral of modernity into obese forms or the fatter than the fat, Ubu.

This hyperbolic journey is over.

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