

America by jean baudrillard

People



During the dawning of the new age, America has always fascinated foreigners with its magnificence and grandeur as if alluring them to come and explore its endless possibilities. Even philosophers of arts and sciences as well as well known personalities in the field of literature describe their American travel as exciting and memorable. They are all captivated by the country's vast wide open spaces, people's culture and advances in technology.

One of France's leading philosophers Jean Baudrillard, well known for his postmodernism and mysterious philosophical views on historical and present events was also captivated by America's great elements of cultures and advancement. Baudrillard became more encouraged to launch his own travel when he learned of French philosopher Tocqueville's American journey. And so in the mid-1980s, Baudrillard made his own travelogue and documented his findings in his book, *America* (1988).

This book was originally written in French and presented Baudrillard's observations of American culture, advancement in civilization as well as the illness of America itself. According to him, what can be read from this book is merely his observation on his visit and should not be taken seriously but not necessarily for granted. Baudrillard was known for his witty and opposing views which he clearly shown from his other writings.

His use of metaphor and linguistic style may not be so common to everybody but reading his lines altogether and understanding his motives will bring you to conclusion that he was really an observer and a critic with extra-ordinary perception on events (Baudrillard, 1989) Most part of the book talk about some of the states he visited as well as his discovery of the people, what is within them and how they live in their societies. One can notice his

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astonishment with America which he wrote in his most charmed but satirical manner.

Part of the book which described best what America is all about was “ Astral America”. On this section, he said that being in America was like being in the land of Utopia where everybody seems to be living in their blissful society, complete with amenities, freedom and the advantages using the latest technology. The book America also discusses many significant observations and his analysis which he put in many sections such as Vanishing Point, New York, Utopia Achieved, The End of US Power and Desert For Ever and Astral America.

Astral America described the highest point where America already has its lead in innovations, extensive urbanization and great industrialization among other industrialized nations. Although Europe was already enhanced in terms of industrialization during the 1980s , America has always been the leader in the aspect of economic advantage. This probably encouraged Baudrillard to travel to America and see deeply for himself the status of a grand nation that is continually moving and upgrading itself to be more secured and independent.

Reading Astral America, you could feel Baudrillard’s awe for America’s vast territory and its advancement in many angles. Its modern populations spread among great cities and lands where everybody lives in glorious days. His description of this nation was of a prosperous country where Disneyland is a place people from all over the world want to visit. Furthermore, he said that you could find in this nation the perfect combination of entertainment and

fantasy. Everybody do their job with their modern machines and the use of their technology for entertainment is endless.

As he was quoted on following: Astral America. The lyrical nature of pure circulation.. As against the melancholy of European analyses... The exhilaration of obscenity, the obscenity of obviousness, the obviousness of power, the power of simulation...Sideration. Star-blasted, horizontally by the car, altitudinally by the plane, electronically by television, geologically by deserts, stereolithically by the megalopoloi, transpolitically by the power game, the power museum that American has become for the whole world (Baudrillard, 1989, p. 27).

However, throughout his American travel, Baudrillard made the impression that he was conscious of his status as a European because of the comparison on what he saw. In between the lines, he described Europe as an inescapably old, ethnic, contrived, confined and accustomed with lesser modernization wherein he view America as more than the reality, formed into a vast realization of cultures and colorful depiction of replication from different cultures. Such as on the following excerpts: Why should I go and decentralize myself in France, in the ethnic and the local, which are merely the shreds and vestiges of centrality?

I want to excentre myself, to become eccentric, but I want to do so in a place that is the centre of the world. And, in this sense, the latest fast-foodoutlet, the most banal suburb, the blandest of giant American cars or the most insignificant cartoon-strip majorette is more at the centre of the world than any of the cultural manifestations of old Europe (Baudrillard, 1989) But Baudrillard also declared some critical views about America. Here, he said <https://assignbuster.com/america-by-jean-baudrillard/>

that other Europeans see the grand nation as a land of barbarism. That although it was a great nation full of life and abundant with opportunities, it has also its own disease and flaws.

In Astral America, he does not see America as all glory although it is unlike Europe that had its dark historical days on wars. He sees America as a vast desert where culture, politics and gender are in a state of commotion. There is also hunger, internal conflict, discrimination and prejudice. He wrote that: America always gives me a feeling of ascetism. Culture, politics – and sexuality too – are seen exclusively in terms of the desert, which here assumes the status of a primal scene...Even the body, by an ensuing effect of undernourishment, takes on a transparent form, lightness near to complete disappearance.

Everything around me suffers this same desertification (Baudrillard, 1989). Even at the rural sides of America, the grandest of homes and the beauty of the landscapes cannot hide the over simplicity that is embracing the monotonous life of the American people. Thus the Utopian dream cannot be in full reality itself but only a temporary solace from the harshness of the Western life. America after all is not free of problems but unlike other nations it is undeniably one big nation that faces its problem head on. As Baudrillard was quoted on the following: On the aromatic hillsides of Santa Barbara, the villas are all like funeral homes.

Between the gardenias and the eucalyptus trees, among the profusion of plant genres and the monotony of the human species, lies the tragedy of a utopia dream made reality...This is America's problem and, through America, it has become the whole world's problem ...(Baudrillard, 1989), p. 30) But <https://assignbuster.com/america-by-jean-baudrillard/>

even as Baudrillard's depiction of life in the harsh environment of the Americans, he said they can take setbacks squarely. That even in war one can observe their presence of mind is always intact. Also he never failed to observe America's ruler and their influence on their people.

Nevertheless, he also took notice of American politics as well as he sees political power in America as a uniting factor which binds people in one great nation. Although he never mentioned of France's leaders in America as well as its absence on the section on Astral America, his discussion with America's leaders did signify that there is also a difference between his country's rulers as well as America's political leaders. His mention of America's leaders as they influence the whole America in their fight for freedom and justice were properly justified.

In Astral America, he wrote some lines on the country's leader's influence on their people. As he wrote that: The smile of immunity, the smile of advertising: "This country is good. I am good. We are the best". It is also Reagan's smile – the culmination of the self-satisfaction of the entire American nation – which is on the way to becoming the sole principle of government (Baudrillard, 1989). In terms of advancement, Baudrillard's depicted America's perfect expansion of technology with the latest use of transportation and communication.

Cities were alive with people and modern structures. All kinds of recreations and sports are there recognizing it as the power museum of the world. He even asks himself why he should stay in France and be with the shadow of France when he can even stay in America and do what the Americans do. But comes here comes Baudrillard's strict observation. He theorized that
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America could just be a dream or a reality. He said that although he considers this country much like Utopia where everything may be in realistic and in unrealistic state he only sees its population as if living in simulation.

They can be the model of lesser nations and ideal material of the modern world but they also have flaws and infirmities. He further discusses that America was like a giant hologram as if all information is contained in one whole element and holds everything in place. For example, every state from every direction offered the same services as he delightfully stated: America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved.

Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams, too...The Americans, for their part, have no sense of simulation. They are themselves the simulation...(Baudrillard, 1989). The book America also talks about the hostility of the Wild West, the dazzling sound of the jazz, the vacant and morbid deserts of the South-West, the neon lights of the motels and gang warfare in New York City. He also sees America as a vast empty space with savage and mixed-cultured people populating the cities.

In short, he sees America as an advanced nation existing with all its special effects but taking a deeper look inside its system is a hollow society living in an artificial world. During his class film lectures, he always discusses about the Vietnam War in the 1960s. He claimed that in reality, America did not win the war on the ground but only paralyzed the small Asian country. Although the US was always portrayed as victorious such as on popular movies like *The Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*, accordingly these films did not

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significantly depicted reality but were made only for entertainment with the use of modern cinematography.

From the French journal *Liberation*, Baudrillard stated that the 1991 Gulf War did not actually take place. That everything people have seen on TV was only “hyperreal images” created and manipulated by no less than the newest technology on cinematography. That America has only made a perfect visual art that artificially portrayed realism to achieve a striking and realistic effect but actually did not present the real photographic representation of what is behind the event.

Throughout the 1990s, almost all of Baudrillard’s work focus on hyperreality theme of the postmodern culture and yet his writings are sometimes disjointed and aphoristic. To simply said, his works expresses his own opinion or even the general truth but not necessarily the reality itself. On the 20th of November 2005, Deborah Solomon of the *New York Times Magazine* interviewed the French philosopher regarding some background and belief of the archetype “French” intellectual. Solomon wants to dig deeper to discover what is behind the man’s quality as a journalist and a philosopher.

From the interview, Baudrillard always respond with alertness and proudly discussed his philosophical views on life, the realities of war, and the attitude of man toward logical thinking and simple reasoning. Although the interview leads to a seemingly ridiculous question such as how he believes that the US invasion of Iraq was to spread freedom and not war, Baudrillard answered his most rhetoric answer. He stated that: What we want is to put the rest of the world on the same level of masquerade and parody that we are on, to put

the rest of the world into simulation, so all the world becomes total artifice and then we are all-powerful.

It's a game (cited by Parker, 2005). This led to Solomon's conclusion that Baudrillard's ideas although are unfathomable at first glance, they are however most fascinating and compelling. That this man who uses his intellect to surmise and analyzed things in his most amusing and bewildered manner was a serious man. He normally uses words like "hyperreal" and "transistorize" to commonly describe on what he believes in. Baudrillard writes with a kind of unstoppable electric lyricism that is fast-paced but transparent. He diced his statements with jargon and sometimes uses technological idiom that provides his prose a metaphorical suppleness.

His accounts which he diligently introduced in his book America were put through most depictive and striking description while identifying the facets of the modern American life. Of New York for example, he wrote that: It is a world completely rotten with wealth, power, senility, indifference, puritanism, and mental hygiene, poverty and waste, technological futility and aimless violence, and yet I cannot help but feel it has about it something of the dawning of the universe (Parker, 2005). His great influence on literature can also be seen on the blockbuster movie "The Matrix".

Filmmakers Andy and Larry Wachowski picked the idea when they discover of Baudrillard's book "Simulacra and Simulation". Although Baudrillard do not like the idea that his work would be represented in a film that is not real, he said that the scheme of using his work was not properly advised and called for. Some people consider his works as unbiased literature that are constantly intriguing while they cross the borders of normal criticisms. Mr.

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Baudrillard tackled different subjects ranging from race and gender, art and literature, to the present day trauma such as the September 11 terrorism.

Although his comments are openly misquoted and misunderstood they altogether sparked controversy. Nevertheless he was clearly known as more than an observer with alarming analytical mind and always opinionated with his own subliminal eccentricity. The editor for Lire literary magazine Francois Busnel said of Mr. Baudrillard that he was unique in his own ways because he is very independent in his ideas and does not take sides. Considered as a postmodern guru of our time, his observation and analysis of today's society emanate from his own distinction to shape in with any theoretical category.

Wearing thick glasses, his look emanates a warm personality although many know him for his black humor and witty aphorisms. He was always quoted for his postulation of today's world where everyone lived in his simulated world that the real thing has vanished and everything was replaced with artificial feelings and situations. As a proof that things were getting unreal in our world were the establishment of shopping malls, amusement parks, sensationalized TV programs and news programs. Television shows and films are only animated by no less than actors devoid of authenticity and meaning.

He always advises the media that the pursue for reality cannot be truly accomplished because the world today abounds with illusions. His interview in 2005 by no less than The New York Times was all about his beliefs on today's values and the need for freedom. Baudrillard was quoted that all of man's values are simulated and that freedom was the most abused of all the given privileges. That anybody have a choice between buying material things

because it is a simulation of freedom. He also criticized the practice of the consumers in which they buy material things out of necessity but of the status and label on the product.

Again, as we refer in his travelogue *Astral America* which he originally wrote in 1986, he was remembered writing that America has all the simulated freedom in purchasing and having things that is not really necessary. For him, America's advantage in terms of product availability is the original version of modernity as the French were just a copy with subtitles. He could be implying that although America having to exist in complete state of unreality was still adored and looked upon by no less than another great nation as France.

Although he was always aloof and shunned media most of the time, his articles can frequently be found on newspapers in Paris. "The Spirit of Terrorism: And Requiem for the Twin Towers" was one of his recognized writings which he made in dedication of the 9/11 attack. He argued that through creating self reality, the Islamic fundamentalists have made their own simulation that the West would constantly be their targets for terrorism. Baudrillard was oftentimes branded as obscure, indifferent and reversely opinionated because he was unlike other postmodernists as he always disagrees with simple reasoning.

Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, both author and publisher of the 1998 book *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* also have something to say on Baudrillard's attitude and comments. They said that, "if the texts seem incomprehensible, it is for the excellent reason that they mean precisely nothing" (Cohen, 2007). But the French critic does not give a <https://assignbuster.com/america-by-jean-baudrillard/>

damn on such acid remark. He said that, “ what I’m going to write will have less and less chance of being understood but that’s my problem” (Cohen, 2007),

On March 6 this year Jean Baurillard died in Paris of long time illness at the age of 77. The internationally celebrated and influential French intellectual who achieved world fame for his rhetoric that is always incomprehensible by the simplest of mind and the author of more than 50 books left a vacant space in the midst of a denser and over-apocalyptic mesh of misunderstood scenarios. A legend of his own kind, he will never be forgotten by those who believe in his underlying principles and unusual philosophical views (Cohen, 2007).

Jean Baudrillard may not be so popular to many because of his indifference to the common postmodernist literary figures. But upsetting common analysis of a situation through independent reasoning and protracted logic somewhat separated him from the ordinary that are overused and boring. We may never see one like him in our modern age but somebody might dare to be different in reasoning just like him and might also provide us a more in-depth perception of things and events.

His book America provides us the view on how an intellectual personality like Jean Baurillard sees America from different perspective. In Astral America he introduced us more with a deeper understanding on how a European see America as a modern world but full of artificial elements that produces artificial excitement. Although his intention in writing this travelogue was only to write about a simple travelling experience, many considered this

literature as his way to present America to the people in Europe what in reality America is.

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