

Hyperreal America*

Jean Baudrillard (Translated by David Macey)

Abstract

May 1968 in Paris was a utopian revolt which failed; America is a utopia which has been achieved. It is the original version of modernity. This article examines the logic of Biosphere 2 a miniature version of the entire planet, but which means the society is already living with the prospect of a catastrophe affecting its utopia, it is a zoological museum in anticipation of its own destruction.

I am not going to speak to you about the economic, political or juridical aspects of America. I am not at all qualified to do so, and my point of view will therefore be that of a wild amateurism and a sort of cultural metaphysics. The paradox is that I experience the country both as completely familiar in its banality, its modernity, and as completely alien, completely fantastic in its hypermodernity. How are we to sort out that? There are scarcely any models. Perhaps the way in which Barthes, for example, approaches Japan, and he himself says that there is no realistic or descriptive ambition involved, that it is basically a *fiction*. Everyone invents his own myth, creates a mythology; the main thing is that there is a complicity. In the case of Barthes and Japan, that of the signifier, the complicity of the signifier. Obviously, it cannot be the same with America. Whereas Barthes was looking for the secret of the Japanese signifier, perhaps it's quite the opposite with America. Perhaps we should be looking for the extraversion of the sign, that sort of proliferation of the sign, that fantastic semiurgy, where something has disappeared to, just as something has disappeared from the hollowness of the signifiers. But what is it? The other model might be Segalen's. Victor Segalen and his concept of *radical exoticism* (he applies it to other cultures and societies): deliberately regarding the United States as a primitive society and doing so quite candidly, almost anthropologically, but still keeping the distance that Segalen wanted to observe in exoticism, a distance that allows the radical alterity of the object to emerge, allows a void to be created around it, so to speak, to make it emerge as an object, and trying, for our part to disappear as a subject. We can never succeed in doing so, and discourse does not allow us to, but it may be possible

to decide from the outset to regard America as an *unidentified object*, an unidentified cultural or virtual object (this is roughly the way you experience it directly, in the raw). Hence the idea of arriving there as though in a primitive society, in the sense that there is also an absence of history ('primitive society' is of course a metaphor). Not exactly of the end of history, but the transposition of the historic dimension into another dimension, which I tend to see as spatial, as, that is, the transfiguration of time into space, and then the fact that the radicality that is our European claim to fame, our characteristic, the critical radicality, the radicality of subjective consciousness . . . over there, all that has passed not into consciousness, but into things. Radicality has passed into things, has become an object-like radicality with an immanent mechanism, which materializes things, and the nature/culture distinction is therefore no longer pertinent. Indeed, that is the inspiring thing about the United States; the fact that the nature/culture, subject/object distinction and so on has, so to speak, been swept away in a sort of tracking shot in which we have to orient ourselves differently. And so we can see the United States as *the primitive society of modernity* or of the future, because it is the society that is closest to its origins, whereas we are obviously far removed from ours.

The fact of moving into this sort of materialization, of the immanent transfiguration of things and of signs was for me a continuation of the French, or European, experience of '68 and before, when the problem was precisely one of making the transition from history to everyday life, of metabolizing all problematics into daily life, into banality. The radicalization of banality was the problematic of the 1960s; the problem, a somewhat situationist problem if you like, was one of radical subjectivity and utopias. At the time, everything suggested that we were moving towards a sort of blurring of the distinction between culture and life, to the abolition of the polarity between the two, reaching the point of culture's self-negation, a self-negation of its own distinctive features, so as to attain another culture. That is what is meant by a utopia. That is what was in the imaginary of the 1960s and of '68.

Now, '68 was in a way a utopia that was *not* achieved. A failure if you like, but not a failure in absolute sense, as utopias are not meant to be achieved. Be that as it may, I went to America in the 1970s, in other words just after the failure of that solution. When I arrived in the United States, I found something like a utopia that had been achieved, in the sense that there was a non-distinction between culture and life, that the transition had been made from a noble, elitist culture to an anthropological culture or, more accurately, an anthropological non-culture. All at once, I found that the utopia we had been living in the mode of subjectivity had in a way been achieved, materialized. All this is fiction of course. Within this fantastic space, I was at last relieved of the dimension of culture, history and so on, of all the things with which we had been saturated for twenty years. I had entered another dimension. That of space, which is anything but a geographical dimension. Space is like thought itself: a dimension in which everything can become visible, visual and material, in which everything is boundlessly extensive, both horizontally and vertically.

This obviously applies to cities and deserts alike, the desert itself being a sort of primal scene, not only a geographical desert but a non-place, a sort of achieved utopia of space, precisely because it is empty or potentially empty. The desert is the virtuality of space, its total availability for any event. But the desert is also an extensible scene. In other words, the metropolis, the cities, seem to have exactly the same desert dimension, that of utopia, the no-place where anything is possible and everything can be achieved. There was of course an element of illusion, of an optical illusion if you like, in all this. But it was deliberate.

In that sense, America is indeed the original version of modernity. Because it has never known the primitive accumulation of time, it seems to me to live in a perpetual present. And because it has never known the slow, centuries-long accumulation of the truth-principle, it lives in perpetual simulation, in the perpetual actuality of signs. *A utopia achieved is of course a paradox*, as utopias are not meant to be achieved. We have, then, a paradoxical situation, and it is America's situation: how does one live in this paradoxical situation, as a utopia can be achieved only in simulation, not at all in the sense that it is false, of course, but in the sense that *the question of true and false cannot even arise*. We have entered a very singular hyperspace.

Not a concentric space. A sort of centrifugal space. As is well known, the cities can be extended to infinity in every direction, and they are not characterized by the symbolic space of traditional urbanism. No public space either, but a form of publicity space. In other words, a sort of deterritorialization, a disqualification of things, but also the possibility of visualizing, materializing everything. No space for discourse in the sense in which we understand it, for critical discourse; a space for the image. No space for historical memory, but rather a space for dispersal, dissemination, a space like that of the desert, the space of potential amnesia and never-ending circulation. In short, a geometric space, but one different from geometry. Geometric space existed in the great empires, in the ancient empires, but this is not the centralized space of empires. Take, for example, the vista of Washington, that immense avenue leading from the White House to the Capitol, a sort of Disneyland of all humanity's museums and all its cultural heritage. That infinitely linear vista is not a centralized vista. Monumentality is replaced by a sort of geometric horizontality. Just as the transcendence of things is replaced by material verticality – that of the buildings. If we think of La Défense and of the difference between that achievement and the wild, spontaneous proliferation of American cities, it is quite clear that ours is still aesthetic, that we are still clinging to a town-planner's aesthetic conception of things, especially with all the latest Presidential projects, whereas we find something very different in American cities. Wherever they are, one always has the impression that they are still drawn in the desert, that they were traced in the desert and still are, made in the image of the uninhabited '*citta ideale*' that you can still see in the depths of Nevada.

That, however, is only the matrix. From there, we can move to Las Vegas, to

Los Angeles, to New York itself, and then move beyond the great cities to those modern microcosms that are supplanting the cities, like Disneyworld, or to experimental microcosms like Biosphere 2, where the whole planet (Biosphere 1) is summed up in a single ideal space. Both are allegories: Las Vegas, Los Angeles; Disneyworld. Pure allegories. By that I mean that the interesting thing about them is the extent to which these developments are organized around the exponentiality of a single function. That is why they are artificial. Unlike our *referential* cities, which have a territory, a memory and a history, these are *exponential* cities, exponential developments. Fictional towns to the extent that fiction (SF) is the extrapolation of a single hypothesis, a single structure, a single model, a single line of force. That is how you create good fiction: by eliminating all the other hypotheses. That is how you create an ideal city or an ideal model; by eliminating all other functions – human, too human – and reducing them to the status of refuse.

This is obvious in Las Vegas: being totally dedicated to gambling, including gambles of marriage and divorce, it is a total circulation of gambling in its abstraction. It is therefore also an anti-architecture; a pure contingency of advertising signs. The total superficiality of the town is bound up with superficiality of gambling and speculation itself. Los Angeles also began with the exponentiality of a few functions: movies, traffic, freeways. The city itself has no organic substance; it is inscribed around a totally bloodless network, a road network. Even the vertical downtown does nothing to change the city as horizontal network.

All the architecture of New York – the architecture of verticality – was in reality born on Coney Island and of the leisure facilities of the beginning of the century. It was on Coney Island that the craziest, the most demented architectural endeavours were tried out and inaugurated before being transposed to Manhattan. Coney Island is gone. It was all burned down. But its architectural axioms about circulation and safety were transposed to Manhattan in a sort of gigantic extrapolation from a marginal function to a global universe, to an entire metropolis which may, however, have therefore retained the underlying characteristics of a great speculative game.

We can extend this extrapolation to Disneyland and Disneyworld. Here we see the deliberate programming of a matrix for tourist hallucinations and leisure activities, but it takes on the dimensions of an entire city and ultimately, with Disneyworld, of an entire world. With Disneyworld, the model borders on the hegemonic – it is a literally exorbitant endeavour, in which it is no longer a city but an entire synthetic world which springs up, a *maquette of our entire history in cryogenized form* – like Walt Disney himself.

In both Disneyland and Disneyworld, it is clear that everything that can be derived from the imaginary has been caught, represented, made representable, put on display, made visual. Literally putting it on show for consumption without any metaphors is obviously a radical deterrent to the imaginary. Once again, utopia becomes reality.

Besides, in that sense, America is indeed a dreamland, in the sense that it

has all the characteristics of dreams as described by Freud: metaphor—condensation/metonymy—displacement, conditions of representability; the difference being that the first two have disappeared, the sole beneficiary being representability, which becomes hyperdeveloped in the hypervisibility of all things, in their visual or pragmatic operation.

We are no longer dealing with the organic developments in which functions were integrated in accordance with a certain hierarchy; we are dealing with the contiguous multiplication of corresponding future matrices or models. Perhaps the cities of the future will spread like that, through the expansion to the size of a city of an extremely specialized functional core.

In a word, we are no longer dealing with towns and political cities defined in terms of *civitas*, or the *polis*. We are no longer dealing with a *polis*, but with a liberated, expanded space, but one in which there is in reality no distance; there is no distance here for the gaze, for the city's self-representation through its monuments, through a discourse. But basically, all this should not be seen as a reverse shot of a European city; it has to be seen for what it is, as it is, as it is openly revealed in tracking shots in the most total disorientation. This neutral space without qualities is, paradoxically, the site of an intensification. It is the site of a great banality, but also that of an intensification of all cultures, of a sort of anthropological version of a new form of space in which all cultures, all ethnic groups and all functions can give themselves free rein. They are no longer secured by a political culture which plays by the rules or by an aesthetic culture which has a whole history. All functions are liberated in a neutral space, and they are therefore overdimensionalized. It is this sort of extrapolation, of overdimensionalization, that gives America its real fascination. There is a sort of superlative quality in this total representability of all functions, all ethnic groups, all languages. We find here a sort of readability, which may be a form of freedom.

The question of freedom certainly does not arise in the same way; it is probably not answered in political or philosophical terms. It is, rather, resolved in a form of mobility and readability. Cities like New York and Los Angeles, which look so monstrous and terrifying, are very much home to those who are used to them. People happily go for walks in them, get their bearings quite happily, and find a host of partial territories in them. As in the desert, which is also an extraordinarily homely space. They have a readability that is not that of our cities, which, in contrast, are extremely difficult to read in their complexity, and extremely labyrinthine. This readability also goes hand in hand with a particular virulence because, whilst the space may be open to all and is, in practice, boundless, it does also have frontiers corresponding to a virtuality which goes in all directions; there is an internal specificity to all groups, all ethnic groups. In New York you see each group dominating the city in its own way. There are no contradictions in the sense in which we understand the term; each function, each form has the freedom to strive for extreme success, to follow its own logic to extremes, to develop a total autonomy. The aim is not a balance of power, or a balance of consciences, but

a sort of antagonism, a mutual challenge. There is therefore great violence, but also total originality.

This means that the European city/American city contrast has a meaning for us because we interpret it through discourse, though I am not sure that it has any meaning in itself. The internal energy, the internal virulence of the American world is not so much bound up with historical contradictions, political discourse or representation, as with an antagonistic and incomparable deployment of ethnic groups acting for themselves. The problem of racism does not arise in the same way; it does not arise ideologically, in philosophical or moral terms of human rights, but in terms of energy, virulence and space. American thought is spatial thought. And that energy is born of the very incomparability of cultures, spaces and discourses; it is born of superficiality itself, of banality, of this non-culture of transcendence. And this incomparability works at every level. It makes it almost impossible to arrive at respective definitions of Europe and America. The charm, the fascination that I am able to find in this universe is that of being disconnected, of 'siderality'. That of fiction. Relief at being unburdened of the terms of our culture, of noble culture, historical culture, memorial culture. The question 'What becomes of individual freedom in this history?' has to be asked in different terms. Over there, it does not arise in terms of mirror reflections or refractions, of the transcendence of consciousness, of moral problems. It is resolved in *the immorality of space*.

At all events, we are no longer dealing with the organic developments in which multiple functions were integrated in accordance with a certain hierarchy, or even in disorder, but with a process of generation by models, with an infinite precession of contiguously multiplied models that starts out from an extremely specialized functional core. Let me take the most recent contemporary example of this operational miniaturization: Biosphere 2, a miniature version of our entire planet in its ideal abstraction, in which we find, curiously enough, the situation from which we started out: an ideal city in the desert, its outline lines traced on the ground, and inhabited by no one. Biosphere 2 itself is inhabited by eight people – a minimal representation of the human race in an experimental situation, in a sort of allegorical space capsule.

Outside Tucson, in Arizona, in the middle of the desert, a geodisic structure of glass and metal, housing all the climates of the planet in miniature, where eight human beings (*four men and four women, obviously*) will live in total autarchy and in a closed circuit for two years – or at least that's the plan – in order to explore, given that we cannot change life, the conditions for the survival of the species. In a sense, it is the first zoo for the human race; the human race has put itself, like other species, in survival conditions, and therefore admits the possibility of its own extinction. But it is of course at the same time a way of asserting itself as the only technological species capable of dominating all others.

This museum-like maquette for the future (an unpredictable future – a

hundred years, a thousand years, millions of years? Who knows?) – is a pendant to the Museum of the Desert, 100 kilometres away, which records 200 million years of geological and animal history. The two converge around the idea of the preservation and optimal management of remains; vestiges of the past in the case of the Museum of the Desert, vestiges of the foreseen future in the case of Biosphere 2. And at the same time the magical site of the desert allows the question of survival – of both nature and species – to be raised with equal rigour.

It is a very American hallucination: an ocean, a savannah, a desert, a virgin forest, reconstructed in miniature and vitrified beneath an experimental bubble. Just like Disneyland's attractions, Biosphere 2 is not an experiment, it is an *experimental attraction*. The most astonishing thing about it is the reconstruction, in the middle of a natural desert, of a fragment of artificial desert (which is rather like rebuilding Hollywood in Disneyland). The difference is that there are no scorpions and no Indians in this artificial desert; there are only extraterrestrials in bright red overalls who have been taught to survive in a place where they destroyed, without giving it a chance, a much superior and much better adapted race. All humanist, ecological, climatic, microcosmic and biogenetic ideology is there, and it is incredibly naive – not that that is important. The astral, transparent form of the building is significant in itself. As always, the absolute space, the desert, inspires the engineers, gives a meaning to a project which has no meaning, unless it means the fantasy of which we always dream: the transubstantiation of the human race into simple elements, with a view to a later race and its appearance.

The corollary to the artificial promiscuity of climates is the artificial immunity of space: all spontaneous generation (of germs, viruses and microbes) has been eliminated; air, water and the physical environment are automatically purified (but so too is the mental environment, which has been purified by science). All sexual reproduction has been eliminated: reproduction is forbidden in Bio 2, as even contamination by living matter is dangerous and sexuality might interfere with the experiment. Everything is conceived with the same abstraction as a brain. Biosphere 2 is to Biosphere 1 (the whole of our planet and the cosmos) what the brain is to the human being in general: a miniature synthesis of all its possible functions and operations: the desert lobe, the virgin forest lobe, the nourishing agricultural lobe, the residential lobe, all carefully distinguished and juxtaposed in accordance with the analytic imperative, and all quite dated in terms of what we now know about the brain, and about the plasticity, the elasticity and the reversible sequence of all its operations. This archaic but futurist-looking exercise in model-making is therefore based upon a huge hypothetical mistake and a ferocious idealization which is doomed to failure. The 'truth' behind the operation in fact lies elsewhere, as becomes obvious when you leave Biosphere 2 and go back to the 'real' America. The truth is that the imaginary or experimental model is in fact no way different to the real and actual workings of this society. Just as the whole of American society is built in Disneyland's

image, so the whole of American society is conducting, in real time and in the open air, the same experiment as Biosphere 2, which is therefore a fake experiment, just as Disneyland is a fake imaginary. Every substance is recycled, flows and circuits are integrated, non-pollution, artificial immunity, ecological balance, controlled abstinence, controlled *jouissance*, and on the other hand, the right to survival and the right to conserve all species, animal, vegetable and social: the formal subsumption of all categories under the sign of Right, of the right to survival that signals the end of natural selection.

The obsession with survival is usually regarded as a logical outcome of life and the right to life. The two are, however, usually contradictory. Life is not a matter of rights, and the prolongation of life leads to death and not survival, which is artificial. It is only at the cost of a lack of life, a lack of *jouissance*, a lack of death that man's survival is assured. At least under present conditions, and it is present conditions that are being perpetuated by the Biosphere principle.

This micro-universe attempts to exorcise catastrophe conditions by artificially synthesizing all the elements of catastrophe. In the *survival* perspective, recycling, feedback, stabilization and metastabilization, the elements of life, are sacrificed to those of continued life (elimination of germs, evil, sex). Real life, which does after all have the right to die (or is there a paradoxical limit to human rights?), is sacrificed to artificial survival. The real planet, which is supposedly doomed, is sacrificed in advance to a miniaturized, air-conditioned, *climatisé* (that says it all: every climate on earth has been naturalized, and subjected to *climatization*) clone which is designed to overcome death thanks to total simulation. Once it was the dead who were embalmed for eternity; now it is the living who are embalmed alive for survival. Do we have to hope for that? Having lost our metaphysical utopias, do we have to build this prophylactic utopia?

So what is this species which is mad enough to presume to survive – not to outlive itself by virtue of its natural intelligence, but to survive physically and biologically by virtue of its artificial intelligence? Is there such a thing as a species destined to escape natural selection, natural extinction, and, quite simply, death? Darwin's last writings outline the hypothesis of a human species being selected, so to speak, to put an end to natural selection, to the natural elimination of species (this is a reversal effect), a species which accomplishes the feat of outliving itself indefinitely, and at the same time of ensuring the survival of existing species (having contributed greatly to the extinction of a large number of them). Is that hypothesis credible? What cosmic contrariness could give rise to such a reversal? What metaphysical anomaly could give rise to the right not to disappear – the logical corollary to having had the remarkable good fortune to have appeared? We rebel against all attempts to eternalize the species, not to immortalize it in its actions, but to eternalize it in a coma that has had a facelift, in the glass coffin of Biosphere 2. In any case, we can conclude that this experiment, like any attempt at artificial survival, at creating an artificial paradise for the species, is illusory, not because it is technically flawed, but because the very principle is flawed. Despite itself, it is

vulnerable to the same accidents as real life – fortunately I would say. Let us hope that the aleatory worlds outside will break this glass coffin. Any accident will do, provided that it releases us from a scientific euphoria administered by perfusion.

From the mythological point of view, the Bio 2 experiment means that, precisely because it is a utopia achieved, this society is already living the prospect of a catastrophe affecting its utopia, a catastrophe on a world scale of course. It must therefore put itself into a different orbit, and live in survival conditions. Now, as with Disneyland, when you leave this virtual biosphere to go back into the real, you notice that the whole of American society is already living in the same conditions and in the same mode as the artificial conditions and mode of the biosphere module, that the whole of American society is already virtually biospherical in that sense, already prophylactically living out immunity, the problems of recycling and so on – living out an increasingly edgy defensive self-preservation. In that sense, the whole of American society is already settling into a sort of spatial insulation, waiting for who knows what. In that sense too, Biosphere 2 is a sort of achieved micro-utopia for the species, the human species of course, which, for the first time, has put itself into a sort of zoological museum in anticipation of its own destruction, warding it off by means of this artificial synthesis.

One could go so far as to use the dimension of war to describe this virtualization of things, this hypervisibility, this hyperpredictability and programming, hyperprogramming, of things. It is in that sense that I have spoken of the Gulf War and of a virtual war which was, from the point of view of the American strategists, projected into a sort of synthetic operational space. A sort of wartime utopia was achieved, a perfectly technological, perfectly clean war – I am speaking from within the imaginary of those who planned it – a war without enemies, which is obviously a dream war. Here again, the imaginary of war itself no longer exists; it has finally been written out of the simulation model, where all that remains is execution, total operationalization in an expurgated context, in exactly the same way that all germs, even all sexual reproduction and anything that could interfere with the ideal model have been expunged from Biosphere 2.

I am describing a situation, and I am certainly not doing so in terms of value judgements, especially not negative judgements. For me, the discovery of this unconditional spatiality and visibility, which in a way contradicts our cultural categoric imperatives, was a revelation. My description of it is, clearly, inspired by fascination, and by a very specific form of admiration which relates to the fact that, for us, this society remains a utopia to the extent that our society is disappearing. For me, America is – also because of the distance involved and so on – the experience of the disappearance of Europe. There is something fascinating, dizzying, about sensing the disappearance of the very sources of one's own culture and exploring something which remains an alien totality. That society is paradoxical, but it certainly does not experience itself as contradictory because it does not experience itself as imaginary. It does not

exactly have an imaginary of its own in the sense that we have a reflection, a retrospective vision of our own characteristics. What becomes of discourse in all this? Where has the other gone? Where has alterity gone? The paradox is that, over there, one can follow the destiny of utopia. That is why the American system remains an object of fascination and a possible future for us, not because we reflect, thirty or fifty years after the event, what happened over there and what will happen over here – I simply do not believe in that evolutionism of modernity; in my opinion the gap is total, and it is that that is interesting. One wonders about the destiny of a model which, having neither accurate traces of an origin nor a very long centuries-old continuity, can scarcely have any idea of its end or its ends. It seems to me to be a society without ends, but it is, for that very reason, all the more intense in its energy. Having said that, the model has lost its ascendancy. Other models have developed. But if America is no longer the centre of the world, that is quite simply because the world no longer has a centre. Thanks to its scale, its energy and its vitality, the model remains just as fascinating and just as illusory.

Note

* Text of a lecture given by Jean Baudrillard at the University of Essex in November 1992.