**Cool Premonitions:**

**Jean Baudrillard’s *America* version 2.0**

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**Abstract**

Jean Baudrillard’s highly controversial book *America* (published in French 1986, English translation 1988) constitutes the point of departure for an undergraduate class writing project which began in 2020. Students were encouraged to respond to the following prompt: what would an *America* 2.0 look like today in the midst of the Trump presidency? Here we have assembled and arranged the numerous fragments contributed by the students and the editors as a collaborative enterprise in writing differently.

**Keywords:** Jean Baudrillard; America; hyperreality; (post)modernity; simulation; Trump Presidency

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**Preface**

In *America* (1986/1988) – Jean Baudrillard’s highly idiosyncratic, fiendishly provocative and dazzlingly kaleidoscopic record of and reflections on his travels across the USA in the mid- 1980s – the reader joins the self-styled “aeronautical missionary of the silent majorities” (1988, p. 13) on a whistle-stop tour of the “finished form of the future catastrophe of the social” (1988, p. 5). Presided over by the ever-smiling, ever-superficial B-movie actor turned-governor turned-president, Ronald Reagan, drive-thru America is encountered and experienced as “desert” (1988, p. 99); as cinematic spectacle; as simulation; as ‘fiction’; as “hologram” (1988, p. 29); as pure crystalline surface; as ‘primitive’; as “vanishing point” (1988, p. 1); as a paradoxical “utopia achieved” (1988, p. 75); as ‘original’ / ‘eccentric’ modernity. On this breathless road trip, America is envisaged *en passant* by means of a plethora of key Baudrillardian figures and tropes. Indeed, here Baudrillard succeeds in ‘discovering’ the very (hyper)realization (1988, p. 28) of his ‘fatal’ theories and concepts in an “astral America” (1988, p. 27) that is always and everywhere found to be without hope (1988, p. 121). Written in a “delirious prophetic style” (Morrison, 2012) as a discontinuous collection of wry observations, anecdotes and vignettes, Baudrillard characteristically veers widely and wildly from moments of astute insight and critical acuity, to ironic playfulness, to infuriating presumptions and absurd assertions. Little wonder then that this eclectic assemblage of the brilliant, the bizarre and the banal prompted and provoked the most mixed reviews and varied commentaries.

Some were – perhaps rightly – exasperated by his apparent obliviousness to the inequalities and injustices of gender, race and class in America, lamenting his ‘fatal theory’ and “sign fetishism” (Kellner, 1989, 172) as an evasion of the vital, serious work of political economic and social critique. Others, conversely, take critical inspiration: Charles Mueller (2016), intriguingly sees in Baudrillard’s profound articulation of postmodern melancholy, alienation and loneliness in conjunction with notions of cultural disappearance and vanishing, a potential critical framework for configuring the contemporary condition of the blues and African-American music. By contrast, Donald Wesling (1998) pointedly takes Baudrillard to task for a series of Eurocentric misdemeanours and omissions:

“- not quoting a single American person.

-not reading a single American book […]

-mentioning only a dozen place names for places on the West and East Coasts

-making only fleeting references to human, racial, institutional history” (1998, p. 15).

Baudrillard’s astonishment at, and oblique admiration for, the audacity and ‘originality’ of American life and culture, is given short shrift. Indeed, instead of engaging seriously with the diversity and complexity of American cultural and national politics, “Baudrillard ends up,” Wesling continues, “describing his own pet metaphors and opinions, which are memorably fresh and carry the whole discourse by paradox and smiling insult” (1998, p. 15).

Of course, Baudrillard is not alone in having “his own pet metaphors” and many commentators see in his use of language and his literary style something much more than just “smiling insult”. In her consideration of Baudrillard’s rhetorical figures, Élodie Laügt (2012), for example, identifies these textual techniques and tropes as a mimetic response to the very notion pf hyperreality itself, as critical poetic acts of “mimicry” (2012, p. 348). For Joan Kirkby (1990) *America* is nothing less than a “prose poem celebration of America” though it is “short on facts, rich on hyperbole” and has all told “something disconcerting about it”, something that renders it “curiously unconvincing” (1990, p. 74). James Duncan (1990) is equally equivocal: he recognises *America* as a “wonderfully funny, infuriating, brilliant, deeply flawed work” (1990, p. 86) but expresses concern that Baudrillard is “an intellectual imperialist” whose stylistic flourishes and excesses tend to “throw more light on the center than the periphery” (1990, p. 87) – though it must be said that the former complaint is something Baudrillard himself readily acknowledged: “I cannot live as a real American,” he confessed following a lecture in 1992, “As a European, I am a fictional American” (2002: 3); and the latter one is, in effect, only due recognition that the pretension and pretentiousness of contemporary France and French culture is precisely the repeated, albeit indirect, target of Baudrillard’s scorn.

One could go on (and on). But this is not a review of Baudrillard’s reviews. It suffices here to say that *America* hasleft its many critics simultaneously intrigued, exhilarated, amused, annoyed, enraged, unconvinced and very much ill-at-ease. As Morrison puts it most succinctly: the book “still haunts me” (2012). And this is for good reason: it is, let us say, troubling, *uncanny*. And as such, if nothing else, Baudrillard’s book poses a challenge – precisely the challenge to read, to observe, to think, and to write critically and differently.

As convenors of a final undergraduate seminar programme intensively reading *America* (using the 1988 English translation by Chris Turner) we present here a series of fragments or fractals composed by students and /or by us, the editors, in the spirit of – and ‘going beyond’ – Baudrillard that identify, explore and explode the phenomena of American (non-)culture today, several of whose incipient forms Baudrillard himself identified some 35 years ago, and others even he could have scarcely imagined. This is a virtual, violent America of continuing police brutality, alt-right agitators, online influencers, hyper-narcissistic selfie-celebrities, conspiracies, ‘alternative facts’ and ‘fake news’, the post-truth politics of MAGA, and a whole host of ‘antis’ (-vaccines, -mask-wearing, -lockdown) all chaotically spiralling around the black hole of banality at its centre: the Trump presidency. Ecstatic and extreme, eccentric and obscene, this twenty-first century ‘dystopia achieved’ is more American than *America*. The ten contributors here, together, offer some glimpses into this *America 2.0*, or perhaps better *America2*, the exponential intensification, acceleration and amplification of what were, in retrospect, Baudrillard’s all-too-prescient cool premonitions.

Sadly, there was no class trip, no trans-Atlantic flights, no driving in deserts, no jogging along beaches, no milling about in cities, no freeway-flaneries, no fear and loathing. Even without the restrictions necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic, there was no departmental budget for such a thing. Ours was, instead, an online odyssey, a series of media and mediated encounters, though perhaps this is more appropriate today. We were virtually there. The brief for the students, for us, was simple, open and brief. There was no *prescription*. There was a suggestion: to read *America* ‘dialectically’, that is to say, to read Baudrillard’s text ‘naively’ as if he means everything he writes, and then to read him again ironically, ‘cynically’ perhaps, as if he doesn’t mean a single word of it. There was an encouragement: to reflect seriously, critically, on the book’s themes, its concepts, its style, its technique, its shortcomings, its lacunae. There was an invitation: to be provoked, to write in response, to compose one’s own fragment(s) about any aspect of America today; imagine an *America* today (spring 2020 onwards, to be exact). There was no set style or length – as long or as short as you like; be as playful as you like; take risks. The responses could be imitation, homage, parody, pastiche, purloining, lampooning, mirroring, cloning. Any and all of these; or something else altogether, hybrids. The present reader will have to judge the fragments that follow, read them ‘dialectically’. Everyone could write as many or as few pieces as they wished (some wrote several, some just one). There was to be no specific identification of who wrote what – this was to be, this is, an exercise in collective authorship, an equal sharing. There was no *proscription*. Some members of the class chose not to be included here and that has been fully respected. As editors of these contributions, we did not exclude, we did not ‘select’: we arranged, gave a semblance of a sequence; we juxtaposed. Our aim was to show, or better: to showcase these writings. We do not take the credit for them, but we do take the responsibility.

Professor Allen Shelton, who contributes to this volume elsewhere, has kindly and generously written a response to our project, one which we append here as a coda. It is fitting that we conclude with his words not only because we thereby move stateside, but because the very idea of this experiment, of inviting undergraduate students to think and write differently, to write with them and co-create a work for publication, is very much indebted to his passionate pedagogic practice. His daily transformation of the sociology classroom into a creative writing workshop is an inspiration not only to his own students but also to any and every visiting academic privileged to participate in them. Writing differently goes hand-in-hand with teaching differently.

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***America 2.0***

Baudrillard provides a dizzying array of insights concerning America and its people. His America is that of the desert, of speed and disappearance, of images projected onto mineral surfaces, of black holes and silent majorities. But it is not enough to document the petty, violent obscene, obscure and often farcical moments characterising American hyperreality. Indeed, Baudrillard himself explicitly rejected any smug condescension on the part of European outsiders. Old World snobbery and cultural pretensions were, for him, far more odious than the naïve ‘just as it is’ of American unculture.

In any case, for a vision of an America 2.0 then we must look for what in America goes beyond what Baudrillard glimpsed on his road trip. We must look to those food delivery workers in New York demanding they are paid enough to feed their own families, the Black Lives Matter protests who continue the struggle for racial equality the #*metoo* movement determined to end the routine sexual exploitation of women and the indigenous rights activists who organised grassroots opposition to the construction of the Dakota access pipeline. These are fractals of an America to come, America 2.0.

***First things first; or Nostalgia and the eternal birth of the simulacra***

“In the beginning all the world was America” (John Locke cited in Agamben, 2017, p. 34).

And yet, paradoxically, America is deprived of its own history. It is this very reason Baudrillard cites as the driving motivation for the American obsession with recording everything “To them, everything is worthy of protection, embalming, restoration. Everything can have a second birth, the eternal birth of the simulacrum” (1988, p. 39). America and American historical knowledge as simulacra are without context, ungrounded and disembodied from any concept of ‘the real’. This eternal birth of the simulacra is intimately connected with American nostalgia, a nostalgia not only for historical artefacts that do not belong to them, but a nostalgia for a ‘real’ America: an America of endless possibilities, wide expanses for exploration and social experimentation; of small family-owned businesses and the entrepreneurial spirit of the self-made man. The nostalgia born out of the eternal birth of the simulacra has three stages which are continually played out in American politics and pop culture.

An example of these three stages can be found in the latest iteration of the Marvel superhero Spiderman, which is itself a copy without original endlessly reproduced and remade in comic books, films, television shows, Broadway productions and children’s toys. The titles of these three films all refer to a relationship with ‘home’ that which nostalgia is directed towards returning. First, there is *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) where the fictional character returns to his home in Queens, New York (and the rights to make use of the character have returned to the Marvel Cinematic universe). We can relate this stage to the beginnings of the colonisation of the Americas, the ‘settlers’ no doubt felt when they came to America a sense of coming home for the first time, to a place in which their freedoms and loftiest political, economic and religious goals could be realised. Second, *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (2019) a film centred around a school trip to Europe, which documents the second stage of this process – the reconstituting of and longing for sights of memory of which they, the Americans are deprived. Finally, there is *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) which is the completion of American, ahistoricity and context-less-ness emerging at the point of the complete colonisation and recording of history. In this last movie not only do the former spidermen played by Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield return who were previously owned exclusively by Sony, but we also see an appearance of the Matthew Murdock (Dare Devil) who was formally owned by Netflix. This move not only plays into the nostalgia of fans as the Spider-Man from previous films is brought back (Sam Raimi’s Spider-Man trilogy from 2003-2007 and Marc Webb’s Amazing Spider-Man film series from 2012-2014), but with the inclusion of Matthew Murdock it was a statement on behalf of Disney that their monopolisation of Marvel superheroes is complete. Here we can draw a parallel with the completion of a nostalgic political process set into motion by Reagan and his Make America Great Again (MAGA) slogan which had taken place at the time of the writings of the first *America*. 40 years later the simulacra of Make America Great Again is reborn once again in the Trump political campaign - a slogan emerging at a point in which America is the dominant global superpower. The point in which the utopia of America is achieved is the point in which for the American people there is “No Way Home”. It is perhaps no coincidence that at the end of this third movie all the inhabitants of this fictional earth have a spell cast on them which makes them forget who Spiderman is. Not unlike the American people who are caught in a cycle of political amnesia – as even the Biden Administration convinces some that the Trump administration was the dystopian Disneyland of American politics, a fiction juxtaposed and used to convince them the rest of politics is real. But no such ‘real’ can exist in America. As for an analysis of history, a context is needed something upon which a given society, statement or idea can be grounded and fully understood. For Baudrillard, America is ‘primitive’ in having no history or context. Glimpses and repetitions are the only means available to us for perceiving this fragmented and fragmentary social reality. An untimely society can only be grasped in an untimely manner. This is the promise of America, a promise of renewal freed from historical determination. And this is its problem.

***Tele-scopophilia***

Baudrillard’s astral America: the road trip: the car: the windscreen: the imperative – to drive!

Our viral America: the lockdown: the laptop: the screen: the imperative – to browse!

***Sight unseen***

There’s something magical about America, something special about seeing it in person. From our European perspective America seems grand and vast and beautiful. The frigid heights of the Appalachians to the torrid flats of the Mojave; lakes as vast as seas, primordial swamplands teaming with pre-historic monsters. We Europeans hold these unreal images in our minds next to King Arthur and the quest for the Holy Grail. But America is grander still than anything our feeble imaginations can conjure. The Continental Divide Trail, a three-thousand-mile hike from Canada to Mexico is a far greater pilgrimage than anything here. But *visiting* America? No! That would undo the spell. The Great Lakes may well be vast, but once it stretches over the horizon, it’ll look no different than our oceans. To see it in the flesh is to rationalise, to comprehend. This is, perhaps, why the Italians make the best westerns. They understand mythic America, know not to make it seem too real… America? There be dragons!

 “I was 18 when I first took a Greyhound bus across North America (…) When I returned I felt somehow changed. My brain stretched by distance and movement and space and, in many ways, I don’t think I have ever gone back to the person I was before that trip. My thoughts, my rhythms, my impulses have been threaded through with a strange propulsion, a restlessness, a desire to be between places. People often ask me when I fell in love with America. It was the moment when I felt it move” – extract from Laura Barton’s *American Road Trip*, (first broadcast BBC Radio 4 Extra 20/10/2018).

I, too, feel this yearning for being between places despite never having physically *been* to America. Perhaps this is shared by my entire generation; perhaps not. But I for one have felt America ‘move’ my whole life. I have become intimately familiar with the hallmarks of American ‘freedom’, not just from the perspective of the film camera as in generations past, but from the phone camera and the internet chat room too! Vine provided a closer, more personal view of America, while Tumblr acted as a vehicle for international friendships which are anathema to the para-social relationships to those stars of the silver screen. I know many young Brits who crave a mobile ‘freedom’. ‘Van life’ has been particularly popular lately, trending on both TikTok and Instagram. I for one suffer terribly when I live in the same house for more than three months. We children of the internet are familiar with that fascination which drives Baudrillard. But what is it to feel this without having experienced America first-hand? England is so lacking in the motels and mineral surfaces that *make* Astral America. We simply do not have the geography. We make a pretty poor knock off. Imagine a British remake of *Thelma and Louise*! It would likely feature narrow boats, the open road replaced with the inland waterways. The climax? Our protagonists hurtle towards the sea at a breath-taking 12 knots, followed by a freeze-frame of the boat slowly sinking.

***Europeanness as special effect***

St Bernard de Clairvaux Church was built in the 12th century in Spain. St Joan of Arc Chapel was finished around the 15th century in the Rhône River Valley, France. More locally, here in Lancashire, England, Agecroft Hall dates back to late 15th century. But none of these three venerable edifices are still to be found in their original sites. Falling into neglect and ruin, they were all shipped to the USA in the early 20th century.

Conceived in Europe, these buildings bided their time as *real.* Forgotten, abandoned and in states of disrepair, they were also *really* disappearing in Europe. Relocation allowed them a second birth. Unable to survive in Europe, they found a new home on the other side of the Atlantic. Ironically, a part of European history became better preserved outside of it. European legacy became more ‘real’ in America; inauthenticity more ‘real’ than reality - *hyperreality*.

European buildings in America are enhanced Europeanness; Europeanness done better; Europeanness as special effect.

America as *utopia achieved,* fulfilled through its inherent placelessness and ahistoricity, both of which allow for living in a perpetual simulation. No historical or cultural density. Weightlessness. Living in a self-created and self-realised dream. European monuments in America? Ancient Spanish Monastery in Florida? Why not? Anything is possible in the land of the free. Free only insofar as empty, therefore capable of being ‘nothing but what it imagines.’

America is the land of the freed: freed from time; freed from place.

America as the home of the anatopic, of the anachronistic.

 ***‘Touching from a distance’***

In Simon and Garfunkel’s 1964 *Sound of Silence*, it was the neon light of the television screen that put an end to community, to collectively relating to one another. We talk, we do not speak, we hear, but we do not listen; the simulacra preceding, taking over the social. In the case of Joy Division’s 1979 single *Transmission*, we can see the strain and eventual forgetting of what it means to be intimate, to touch but always at a distance. It is perhaps telling that the first line of the song is “radio, live transmission” as if the amplification of communicating a specific message is concomitant with the death of interpersonal connections, giving rise to a mutual misunderstanding and misrecognition. To grasp the death of those old sociological concepts (community and social relations) we must look to America “the finished form of the future catastrophe of the social” (Baudrillard 1988, p. 5). What emerges in this context?

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 genuses and the monotony of the human species, lies the tragedy of a Utopian dream made reality. In the very heartland of wealth and liberation, you always hear the same question: ‘What are you doing after the orgy?’ What do you do when everything is available - sex, flowers, the stereotypes of life and death? This is America’s problem and, through America, it has become the whole world’s problem. (Baudrillard 1988, p. 29)

The height of obscenity brings the re-emergence of the pat­tern of seduction: 'What are you doing after the orgy?’ (Baudrillard 2005, p. 187)

America is pure surface appearance. There is no depth behind the words and smiles of the American people. When the world is emptied out of all substance and depth, the social becomes obscene. Everything is brutally realised, liberated, highly visible and technically possible. America is the society of the orgy, the absolute negation of touching via its very excessiveness.

In the words of Ian Curtis (1979), there is only ‘touching from a distance’.

It is the very absence of depth but its appearance that is so fascinating and perhaps seductive about America, is there anything more beautiful than pure innocence and sincerity? There is something so frustrating and yet alluring about these surfaces, about words and gestures for the sake of saying something, doing something.

***Fascination and seduction***

It is the pattern of seduction that returns in the obscene totality of America. Reversibility over exchangeability, but a reversibility that brings about a difference – an astral seduction.

Fascination involves being transfixed and ironically immobilised while moving through the American roads. The endless travel on the long stretches makes it appear one has not moved; immobility as the product of mobility. Fascination involves passivity, taking on the role of the spectator. What is fascinating about America is the obscene, the pure naked surface, all is on display. In contrast to fascination with its obscene visibility which of course implies the end of the social or the lack of the social (it never existed). Seduction is a relationship (seduction as activity and passivity); one leads and invites the other to lead them, to seduce one must also be seduced. With seduction obscenity is only visible through masks. One can only perceive it indirectly, it is opaque, visible only through the play of signs, through games. In this picture the obscene is partially visible, partially hidden. Both parties can only see it out of the corner of the eye. But once the obscene is laid bare, seduction disappears (obscenity as pure blind aggression, one does not relate, one dominates).

***Unforgettable***

An article by Tom Perkins in *The Observer* from 22 December 2019.

On the night of 18th December 2019, the night of his impeachment in Washington DC, Donald Trump holds a rally in Battle Creek, Michigan, where he “relayed an anecdote” from the 2016 election.

“He and Hilary Clinton had each rolled into the crucial swing state for their final campaign stops hours before the first ballots were cast. Clinton drew a measly audience of ‘500 people’ to her prime-time rally, according to the president’s version of events. Conversely, he drew 32,000 supporters to a Grand Rapids arena despite not taking the stage until 1am.

“’I’ll never forget that night,’ he boasted, ‘We did it. And we won Michigan. And word is we’re much higher in the polls in Michigan than we ever were in 2016.’

“The tale is not true. Trump’s rally drew a crowd of 4,200, while Clinton’s notched up 4,600. But the story was red meat to his Michigan audience last week who cheered Trump’s fantasy memory as if it presaged another victory in this key battel ground state in 2020.

“However, the current reality in Michigan for the now impeached president is a bit different. Polls consistently show Trump trailing top Democratic candidates in Michigan …”

The manipulation of numbers might be seen as yet one more instance of Trump’s fallibility of memory and propensity for lying, and, above all, as more evidence, were it needed, of his hubris and narcissism. But this would be to miss the point. The inflated figures are not invented primarily to boost Trump, to stoke his already overheated ego, to make him feel good, to bolster his popularity; rather they are presented *to make his audience feel good*, to give *them* a sense of *their* own popularity. The loud minorities of Trump’s devotees are made to feel that they are popular, that they are part of a majority. It is *they* who are reassured, made to feel good about themselves. We are the many; we are the mass of ordinary people. I am not alone. *I am popular*. People like me like me. We are the people. The audience rejoices in itself … this is why all evidence to the contrary fails to damage Trump. It damages only the self-worth of his audience, not of Trump, and that is why such ‘fact-checking’ is rejected by them.

Reagan was only as sincere as his smile, Baudrillard tells us. Trump is as truthful as his memory, as trustworthy as his arithmetic – but none of this matters to his cultic followers. He is esteemed by his supporters in as much as they esteem themselves. To acknowledge his stupidity and cruelty would be to admit their own.

***Wallpaper***

Regarding those who stand in the background of Trump’s rallies / speeches: they are like a class photograph or a choir, a chorus. Young, multicultural, smiling, they are, of course, wholly unrepresentative of Trump actual supporters. That is why they have chosen them. They are what Walter Benjamin would term a ‘wish-image’.

Trump’s beautiful wallpaper for his ‘beautiful’ walls?

***The Wire***

3rd November 2018. Trump at a campaign rally in Montana:

“We have our military at the border. And I noticed all that beautiful barbed wire going up today. Barbed wire, used properly, can be a beautiful sight” (cited by Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig [both *Washington Post*] in *The Guardian*, 21 January 2020).

Trump’s idea of a “beautiful wall” has now been scaled back. He has announced that he wants a “beautiful” barbed-wire fence. A razor-wire fence can be beautiful, he has declared. Clearly, Trump has a fine eye for detail, a keen sense of smallest marginal differences. Uneducated, lacking such feeling for the aesthetic, for me there are only barbed-wire fences. One looks pretty much the same as another. There is no-one with a finer sense, a more nuanced sense, of the beauties or otherwise of such things than Donald J. Trump! Thanks to his sensitivity, his perspicacity, a whole new aesthetics of securitization opens up for us.

What might we term this new aesthetic movement?

Neo-brutalist metallic

Fence-post expressionism

Sistine (system?) chaparral

Razorwire rococo

***Ça n’a pas été*** (as Roland Barthes might have said)

Late October 2019: According to Rucker and Leonnig (ibid), Trump wanted pictures to be circulated showing troops deployed at the US-Mexican border.

However, “Troops would not be moving to the border instantaneously, even after they received orders. ‘I can’t give people pictures of somethings that’s not happening,’ [Dana] White [press officer to the secretary of defence Jim Matthis] told [Kevin] Sweeney [Mattis’s chief of staff].

‘That’s your problem, Dana,’ Sweeney said. ‘Just get the damn pictures.’

(in *The Guardian*, 21st January 2020).

Baudrillard’s ‘The Gulf War Did Not Take Place’ now serves as Trump’s PR manual.

***Twelve Angrier Men***

Imagine a contemporary remake of that classic Henry Fonda movie from the 1950s *Twelve Angry Men*. Instead of envisaging the persuasive power of the lone voice of reason – a Habermasian cinematic conceit if ever there was one – the new version today would reverse the flow of argumentation (though retaining the all-male, all-white jury of course – a thing of the future as well as the past). It would begin with one bigot refusing to join with the eleven other jurors in voting for acquittal. By the end of the film, after shouting, bullying, and a relentless appeal to prejudices and resentments, they are all now voting for the death penalty by lethal injection. The Henry Fonda character is the last to crack – but crack he does. (In fact, he becomes the most insistent and cruellest of them all: “Lethal injection? Fuck that. Make it the chair. Fry the fucker!”).

***Priorities***

Prior to the first Covid 19 lockdown announced by the British Government, the citizens of the UK were to be found busy queuing outside supermarkets to stockpile toilet paper. In America, they have been queuing round the block to buy guns and ammo.

Americans are clearly less afraid of Covid-19 than they are of each other.

***Viral times***

Europeans, it is often said, cannot understand two aspects of American society: their abiding opposition to a proper social healthcare system and their equally insistent demand to be able to buy and carry guns. Guns, but not health, must be freely available and on demand. The American response to the Covid 19 pandemic – long queues outside gun stores – unmistakably brings these two mysteries together. How to make sense of this? Bafflement x perplexity = incomprehension2.

***Parkrun***

Saturday, 9am. Flocking to the San Francisco Yacht club, like a pack of once caged dogs, those already sweaty runners force their way to the front of the starting line. Masked as a positive and inclusive event, the weekly celebration of self-exhaustion is set to begin. A showcase of endurance, agility, stamina - eyes set firmly on the finishing line. One sole aim; perform better. Better than others, better than ourselves – by one minute, one second, it must be better, we must be better, than last week.

A roar of applause as each runner passes onto the final kilometre. Adrenaline building, building from those cheers of strangers. Staggering across the finish line, short lived relief remains bound up in fear of timing. Another week complete, mirroring those exact movements and emotions of the last and the one before and the one before that.

parkrun: a weekly reminder to self-exhaust for congratulation, for self-reassurance. We can outrun ourselves.

***“What does a successful revolution look like?”***

The new revolution- the Kardsahian revolution has arrived as Baudrillard predicted in the forms of technological communication and self-advertisement. A generation neither fired by ambition – in this we can perhaps suggest heroic ambition? – nor fuelled by the energy of repression, focused upon themselves, in love with business as a performative prestige. Hovering between media, advertising and computing, clean and perfect. They see themselves as mobile and enchanted, motivated but cosily effective. ‘’New faces, new fingernails, glossy brain cells the whole topped with a tousle of software’’.

***The desert – again***

America tried to conquer all imaginable frontiers, space being the ultimate race. But in the end, when no one seemed to be bothered by any Star War, in an ironic way the ultimate frontier turned out to be so similar to the desert the heart of Americana keeps coming back to, the fascination of the blank space and the death of seduction. The outer space is the mirrored American desert, as devoid of culture and sublime as its Earth counterpart.

***Time-space-consciousness compression***

New York, the city that never sleeps. Los Angeles, the city of dreams. 2500 miles between insomnia and narcolepsy. 2500 miles of sheer horizontality, once fought by the speed of the motor car and the aeroplane, now cancelled out by the light speed of fibre-optic cables. The digital age has disintegrated the distinction between conscious and unconscious. America, this blueprint for our own *catastrophe of the social*, is populated by sleeping wonderers, thoughtless consumers lost in cyberspace. They park on the information superhighway and, through uncritical osmosis, assimilate streams of data. Unhinged conspiracies gain alarming traction, from moon landing hoaxes and flat earth to covert chemical experiments and government orchestrated terror attacks. The tide of information has flooded America, returned the desert to the depths of the sea. In this new Atlantis, the people are as bottom feeders, detritivores, feeding off oceanic snow; the rotten scraps that are cast out from the long dead corpse of reason.

***Astral influencers***

The blogosphere has become an integral part of a manufactured biosphere in which influencers are the astral force that keeps the spectacle of consumption ticking. Their narcissistic gravitational pull fuels the collapse of the social and breeds the black hole of the masses. They are self-objectified *homo economicus* guiding their followers across the commodity culture constellation through their phone screens. A radical superficiality of profound depthlessness coated with a sense of expertise and an air of false authenticity, guided by a desire for fame, wealth, and stardom.

***America on-line***

Slogans and soundbites audacious in their transparent meaninglessness. Emptiness shines out though speeches, cut into fragments, removed from context, and beamed across the world. ‘*Information*’ has accelerated beyond the 24-hour rolling news of ‘video culture’ now streams directly into your own personal world, designed to arrest attention for a fraction of a second, thousands of times a day. Filtered by social media algorithms, your own bespoke ‘truth’ fortifies opinion not through logic, but by reconstituting itself into (alternative) fact. There is no room for subtlety or debate in this America. Jingoistic devotion or bitter outrage. Anything less, and America will leave you in the dust.

***America on-stage***

In 2017, the Delacorte Theatre in Manhattan's central park (New York City) hosted a production of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. There is a long-standing tradition of likening contemporary heads of state with the titular Caesar, so it shouldn’t be surprising that Caesar appears on stage blond wigged and red tied, with constant unnecessary hand gestures. What could have been an interesting conversation about how and in what ways today’s president of the United states compares to that Roman statesman (what do such questions and answers illuminate about contemporary politics and the political personalities involved), was instead replaced with a short video clip of the assassination scene, a tweet from Fox News, and right-wing outrage that the left fantasised about killing their Demagogue. Ignoring the context of the overall negative light the play shines on political violence and instead constructing an imaginary notion that this was some sort of death threat.

Following this, right wing protestors attempted to storm the stage on every subsequent performance of the play (succeeding once).

***Driven***

‘He who drives alone is dead’: dead, because he is expelled from the velocity; he is condemned to a slowness that is death. Velocity - the joy of tempting death, simultaneously affirming that one is alive: this used to be the charm of driving. Nowadays, being safely ensconced in safety belts and all sorts of protective apparatuses, even the temptation itself became false. No longer is it a risk of life and death: it is pleasure without possibility of death. In the sarcophagus that is modern automobile, everyone inside the car is dead. Those who drive alone therefore suffer a *double murder*: not only was he deprived of the illusional challenge of death that is brought by velocity, but also he is left ‘as he is’ in his sarcophagus of security.

A report from the Arizona Department of Public Safety mentions a car pulled over by traffic police when a (fake) skeleton was spotted occupying the front passenger seat. The driver had sought to disguise the skeleton as a passenger so as to be entitled to use the high-occupancy lane.

 ***“YES” America! It’s your birthday party***

Kanye West, one of the latest celebrities to try his hand in the bid for the title of the president of the United States. The history of American politics should not lead us to make the hasty conclusion his attempt is doomed from the outset, or reducible to a publicity stunt. Nor should one be fooled by the seeming absurdity of his platform. Absurdity is the positive pre-condition of success in American politics. If we were to judge him by conventional standards of reality it is clear his position is confused, ill thought out and contradictory. He is simultaneously technologically regressive in his coronavirus vaccine scepticism and anti-abortion stance and hyper techno futurist in his desire to appoint Elon Musk as the head of the space programme as well as desiring to model America on the fictional country of Wakanda. But reality has no purchase on America, let alone power itself. Once rid of this outdated notion his efficacy as a candidate is undeniable, he represents the possibility of an America with a superstitious God-fearing politics supplemented by fringe conspiracy theories. That is, the trajectory of the Trump administration, for even he is exchangeable, it is what he could stand in for, the working of a social miracle, the complete deregulation of the real and the becoming normal of a crank world view. Kanye offers the American people another fantastically farcical and entertaining smoke screen, a reality television politic par excellence. The screen, the short circuit of reality and fiction, of true and false, of this or that pronouncement, of being both zero and one, in short of integral reality, this is where power is purest and the only fact of life is the operation of power untethered as long as there is someone with a big American grin or grimace to be its conduit. A possible future of America could be seen in Kanye’s smile.

*Go West!*

***Lemonade or coffee?***

Let us follow Žižek (2011) …

At the end of the evening the young man walks the lady to the door. The young lady asks if he would like to come in for coffee. One is unsure if they mean coffee or something else; one must be led upstairs to find out, seduction preserved, potentiality exists. Potentiality as playfulness.

In the second scenario the young man says ‘I do not drink coffee’ and the young lady replies: ‘That is ok, I do not have any’. In this situation seduction falls away and the obscene kernel of the seductive gesture is laid bare. Maybe becomes a straightforward injunction, yes or no.

There is a third example to be found in the American sitcom *Friends*.

Monica, upon first meeting the character Joey, asks if he would like to come in for some lemonade. Joey accepts and, when Monica turns her back, Joey quickly removes all of his clothes. Monica is shocked; all attraction, desire and the game of seduction comes to an end via the excessiveness of the obscene reading of the situation, or so it appears. For Monica lemonade meant lemonade – the invitation was direct. In the post-orgiastic America though,a pattern of seduction is preserved. Sex disappears within the surface appearance. Monica’s invitation was obscene in the American sense: a pure invitation, a surface without depth. The situation mirrored that of a seductive one. But the directness of the gesture is what put an end to play and seduction. Concomitantly, Joey’s reading reciprocated this directness through misunderstanding, a different injunction was visible, one which would have put an end to any seductive exchange. For Joey took the pattern of seduction at face value and in a truly American style attempts to skip over anticipation for instant gratification – the society of “premature ejaculation” (Baudrillard 2007, p. 39).

***Astral seduction***

What is the key difference between ours and Žižek’s allegories? Upon what does the death of the social hang? Is it not obvious? Lemonade does not mean the same thing as coffee. In contrast to coffee, which can be subject to play, entire cultures have been produced and centred around the café, lemonade has put an end to the need for lemons. Here lies the difference, if we may still talk of difference, between the social of European “social” and the non-social of America “the masses: The more social than social” (Baudrillard 1997, p. 451). Lemonade does not only hide the taste of lemons, it hides the truth that there are none. But even the café as the symbol of a European high culture is disappearing today as America is squared and projected across Europe. One can have coffee without caffeine Costa, coffee that’s a copy of a copy of a copy and, of course, coffee that masks the taste of coffee. Decaf soya Frappuccino. Astral seduction is simply a simulacrum; we continue to mimic the actions and gestures of a sign whose meaning has disappeared. Our mimicry is like a television playing in an empty room, replicant life forms that continue after the end without direction or knowledge of the beginning. There are now courses men can take where proper and appropriate seduction techniques are taught. One can only seduce through institutional mediation. Only touching at a distance is acceptable in America 2.0.

***The intransigence underneath all transience***

The a-synchronicity of events with the flow of time is symptomatic of real time - the negation of the event - its short circuit into the real. Everything is reported, nothing happens. We scramble for the latest information and at the point of consumption it has been rendered obsolete. Information amounts to disorientation, events are astral, the future is already happening, the present is experienced as having already passed. And so every day something world changing happens: Trump has the virus, Trump is out of the hospital. The only guaranteed truth is that nothing will last: everything happens to be un-happened.  But behind this ephemeral temporal flux, time marched on steadily towards Election Day.

***Variation on a theme in Cool Memories***

Mild coronavirus,

Mild manic depression,

Mild holocaust,

Mild extermination,

Mild crimes.

Mildly capitalist,

Mild anti-capitalism:

Everything is mildly 20/20.

***It’s Viral!***

The bacterial temporality: in a world without enemies, after all opposition has been eliminated and the world is not even bi-polar, the enemy within is the supreme terror. Bacterial time is the realized of biopolitical age. Where contagion is unforeseeable and everyone is equally dangerous, any innocent encounter could be death itself: every encounter a gamble. The epidemic is viral: it has gained physical existence in the tracking system of an on-and-offline panopticon, it is a social network of asociality, in life and in death. All contact with other Hunan beings could be dangerous! So disease itself has gone viral, and death gains simultaneity of a live broadcast: at the speed of bio-political and digital-informational transmission, the line between internet and reality is erased.

Is there a vaccine for viral media?

***All smiles***

Americans are only upset about wearing masks because they cover up their smiles. Indeed, perhaps they are fearful that a mask will cover up what their smile conceals which is, as Baudrillard tells us, their emptiness and indifference, the “zero degree of joy and pleasure” (1988: 34). And besides, Americans do have “wonderful teeth”.

***The Social, now social-distanced***

<https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/restaurant-mannequins-coronavirus-inn-washington-trnd/index.html>

One Michelin restaurant outside Washington DC, during the hasty reopening, has decided to put mannequins on every other seat, to satisfy the demands of service at 50% capacity. The restaurant, we might indulge ourselves here, that the rich and powerful of the Capital Hill would occasionally visit. They may now enjoy the happy acquaintance of the mannequins. In Symbolic Exchange and Death, Baudrillard highlighted the significance of mannequin as a mode of existence in society, how they were pure fashion, body without qualities. It is obscenely ironic, how, in our wicked times, Baudrillard was the true prophet, and, dare we presume, the Messiah that arrived, only his resurrection was not televised, and thus did not happen?

The fact that, mannequins are involved to facilitate is doubly ironic: on one hand, the term social distancing presupposes that the social is extant, that, it is something that as a spatial existence, within which distance can be established — an organic, living body that, indeed! into which one can inject light or sanitizer; on the other hand, that the mannequin, occupying the absence of the social, therefore highlighting the absence in its obscenity. The distance — between man and mannequin — no longer transcendent, now immanent within the cozy, elegant, grand-bourgeois decoration of the Michelin restaurant.

Accident reveals the substance: the substance — the undead social, the zombified social, a social without quality, a social of between man and mannequin. This is the social of social distancing.

***God Works in Mysterious Ways***

The *Decameron* contains this story: a Christian wanted to convert a Jew, the Jew decided to visit the Vatican. The Christian despaired: if the Jew goes to Vatican, surely he'd be so repelled by the Roman priests that he’d never be converted! The Jew returned, newly baptized. The Christian was astonished, and so the Jew explained: if there are so many Christians with your Church being like that, surely you must be worshipping the true religion! But it was this true god who blessed the world with the plague outside, to chase people away from the age of the Inquisition into Renaissance: and so it must the same God that blessed Trump with the virus.

***Teletrumpy***

‘Let's Make America Great Again’ was the election slogan of Ronald Reagan. So Trump's 2016 campaign mantra should properly have been ‘Make America Great Again Again’.

His 2020 re-election campaign slogan should have been ‘Make America Great Again Again Again’. And 2024? Again, again, again, again …. Trump as Teletubby. Teletrumpy.

***Baudrillard for Ever.***

A trilogy of essays: ‘The Golf Presidency Will Not Take Place’ (2016), ‘The Golf Presidency is Not Taking Place’ (2018); and, my favourite: ‘The Golf Presidency Did Not Take Place’ (2020).

***Apocalypse Averted?***

Americans will forever be unfree so long as they believe that they are free: this is the lesson to be learned from the Trump presidency. Will the averted apocalypse be nothing? The only thing worse than Trump happening is this: that Trump did not happen. Were Americans to believe themselves brave and free as ever, and the past four years but a nightmare, then their awakening is only to fall into limbo. Trump happened, and is still happening: there is never an averted apocalypse that will not be sevenfold re-enacted later. Think but of the flood, the rainbow Jehovah sent afterwards, and the fire and brimstone of Sodom and Gomorrah. So long as America stood with the grace of God, as Mr. Biden so happily declared, the spell of theocracy is never broken, and the anti-Christ forever waits in the wings, and will enter at any moment through a strait gate.

***Hope(ful/less)ness***

*The ardent voyage continues,*

*the course is set on hope.*

*When will it be your turn, when mine?*

*The course is set on hope.* (Victor Serge, *The Constellation of Dead Brothers*)

Jean Baudrillard: “this country is without hope” (1988: 123).

Walter Benjamin: “It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us”. (Quoted in Marcuse, 2013:261)

Walter Benjamin: “hope is the ritardando of fate.” (1999: 332)

George Floyd died. Before he died, he said he couldn’t breathe.

Let us pause. Let us take a breath, if only because this is given to us for those who could no longer breathe.

How can America hope—how can America be given hope, from those who could no longer hope—could no more breathe? Black Lives Matter is a breath, a collective breath of those, rushed along on the highway to Utopia, rushed along, driven from one job to the next, from shelter to shelter, from one dashed hope to another: Black Lives Matter is a breath; just like the Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington DC, which resolutely placed itself in front of the White House, is a breath in the District of Columbia, a spatial breath, so to speak, taken by the city, a breath on 16th Street, which has long served as the demarcation line of racial segregation inherited from the generation of founding fathers (see Kurzius, 2020). With the decree of the city government, the newly christened BLM Plaza became pedestrian, and all must pause their vehicles and walk: here the rhythm comes to a ritardando, here, truly, the space comes to a standstill.

If the plaza takes a spatial breath, so the movement is a social-political breath, a collective breath that halts the goose-steps of history; just as the Plaza places itself between Trump’s White House and the World, so the Movement places itself between headlong rush into fulfilment of *u*topia—the fulfilment of the nothingness, of the Nowhere—and the present generation. Black Lives Matter is not the fulfilment of hope in the country without hope: it is the precondition of hope—a pause, a breath—with which the march of Fate is retarded; it is the emergency brake on the highway to annihilation.

George Floyd could no more breathe: can it be that, it is only for him without breath, breath is given to us? George Floyd is without hope: his hopelessness constitutes, for us, the imperative to make hope possible: today, America must be able to hope.

America has hope: in the dignity of Black Lives Matter

America has hope: in the eloquence of Black Lives Matter

America has hope: in the truth of Black Lives Matter

America has hope: in the spirit of Black Lives Matter

Black Lives Matter matters

***Conspiracy theory***

With Black Lives Matter we must conspire [*con-spirare*: Latin, ‘breath together’].

To breathe together [*con-spirare*] is also to hope together [*con-sperare*].

Black Lives Matter: our inspiration.

***Free Fall***

‘And I'm proud to be an American, where at least I know I'm free
And I won't forget the men who died, who gave that right to me’

A song *God bless the U.S.A.* by Lee Greenwood

This song was playing in the background while Trump was walking on the stage to deliver his speech on the 6th of January 2021 – the day of the infamous ‘Storming of the US Capitol’.

Five people died as a result of the Capitol rallies.

1. *Are you still proud to be an American?*

Trump got permanently suspended from Twitter on the grounds of posing further risk of incitement of violence. The former president claims that Twitter is banning free speech.

1. *Do you know what it means to for one’s speech to be free?*

Less than four months later George Floyd’s murderer was found guilty.

1. *America, do not forget the men who died.*

Minutes before the verdict, Ma’Khia Bryant, a Black teenager, was fatally shot by the police.

1. *America, who gave you the right to kill me?*

*Am I proud to be an American, where I know I’m free to be killed.*

***The 16th Nivose of Donald Trump***

What happened on 6th January 2021 when a crowd of Trump supporters stormed the US capitol building in Washington DC is most commonly referred to as either an insurrection or riot. The term riot which originally referred to debauchery, extravagance and wanton living is far closer to the mark than any term which designates an authentically political act. But to abandon any political content is equally likely to lead us to a misreading of the situation. To do justice to the farce of the political on the one hand and the riotous behaviour on the other we need to work with Baudrillard’s conception of the orgy which designates the paradox of America’s problem, that of the utopia achieved “what are you doing after the orgy?” The orgy stands in place of the political for America, it is the extravagantly farcical non-event, the event in its astral form.

The orgy of 6th January which mixed excess enjoyment and the simulacra collapse of fantasy and the real resolved itself in a spectacular parody of an American civil war. The classic Marxist insight that history repeats itself first as tragedy then as farce occurring in American society was anticipated by Philip K. Dick’s lesser known book *We Can Build You*, which revolves around an American factory which creates what they call simulacrums of historical figures e.g. a robot George Washington or Abraham Lincoln. The business which followed the model of an old industrial factory is struggling to stay afloat against the competition of the then rising post-modern corporation. To stay afloat the business owner Morty suggests they stage reenactments of the American civil war with the simulacrums, an idea premised on his insight that Americans are obsessed with the civil war (Dick 2016). Most interestingly Morty proposes taking bets on which side would win infusing the simulacra of the event with an entrepreneurial spirit. Can the attack on the capital not be interpreted along the same lines? Not only did individuals storm the capital dressed in army fatigues waving confederate flags, the protestors knew not what to do other than to parody the American civil war or Americas 1776 revolution. Furthermore, their obsessive filming of the event speaks towards an entrepreneurial desire to sell themselves as real American patriots. The obscenity of the image as Alain Badiou argued is always convertible to cash (2020, p. 6). Indeed, the non-event of 6th January was free publicity for the bare existence of the rioters.

Once the rioters had entered and occupied the capitol, they were paradoxically unoccupied. The question in the crowd became What are you doing during the orgy? What do you do when you are inside the capitol? Their answer was to film and take pictures of themselves acting as both voyeur to and exhibitionist in the orgy. This free publicity for the existence of the rioters betrays what was at the heart of the so-called insurrection namely the mania for “an empty victory” (see Baudrillard 1988, p. 19). Through their documentation of the orgy which incidentally made the police work of identifying and arresting the participants comically easy the rallying cry of the day became “we did it! We stormed the capitol!” Like the first man to run a marathon who was carrying a message of victory to Athens…

They also dream no doubt of bringing a victory message, but there are too many of them and their message has lost all meaning: it is merely the message of their arrival, at the end of their exertions, the twilight message of a futile, superhuman effort. Collectively, they might rather seem to be bringing the message of a catastrophe for the human race, which you can see becoming more and more decrepit by the hour (Baudrillard 1988, p.19)

***Capitol Hill, or the propaedeutics to all metaphysics of the hyperreal***

Baudrillard, at one point, put out this hypothesis: what if reality is only a brief interval in history; what if, paradoxically, what is believed to be reality is a game of God: ‘it is God who presides over this dissolution of the world as illusion and its resurrection as simulacrum and virtual reality’ (1996, p. 9), and the interim between the illusion, that is, the medieval, pre-Enlightenment view of the world, and the simulacrum – the overabundance of perfection that we have today – is reality. The hypothesis, alas, is not born in Baudrillard’s head. According to the Lurianic Kabbalah, the creation is the contraction of God: God limited himself, so to speak, to allow the world to take place; had he not done so, the world would immediate be exterminated in the perfection of God (Scholem, 2011, p. 43). Why, exactly, did God limit himself to allow reality to take place? Because ‘the Godhead itself knew that there were within it some powers which, if given a chance, would assume different characteristics than the rest of the Godhead. The first aim of the *tzimtzum* [God’s limiting himself] was to seclude these potentially different divine lights in the empty *tehiru* [primordial nothing], thus cleansing the Godhead of those *reshimu* [residue] elements’ (Dan, 1987, p. 264). Transposed to the Baudrillardian register, this means that for the hyperreal to be total and fulfilled, reality, even in inarticulate forms, must be let out and played out to their logical conclusions, so that the final annihilation of the fallen, impure world can be completed in the divine light of the hyperreal.

In this light we must understand the Storming of the Capitol. This last act is both symbolic and real, and its symbolic reality is amplified by the simultaneity of transmission. The world suffered one last orgy of an empty event: it is an event that is transmitted but without content to be transmitted, no content: no political agenda other than a formal negation. The participants had no agenda other than to disrupt the session of confirming Biden’s presidency – a suspension, an interruption, but not an end. The storming of the Capitol is purely accidental in the musical sense of the term, that it only highlights the tonality, the regularity, the structural and institutional integrity of the order. It is the final accident of the Real that would pave way for the fulfilment of the Hyperreal in the coming Biden years. God limited himself so as to return all the purer, so the Real returned one last time, to make the hyperreal impregnable: Presidency, House, and Senate, now all in Democrats’ hands.

***Hereditary Sin?***

The storming of the Capitol is a pseudo-event that is transmitted without content, it is the impotent revenge of the Real, a reality that has lost its own tradition, its own history. It may be said that Louis Napoleon’s 18th Brumaire is the transmission without content of Napoleon’s Hundred Days, and Mussolini’s March to Rome that of 18th Brumaire, Hitler’s Beerhall Putsch that of Mussolini’s March, and we now witness another imitation of the tradition, an event transmitted without significance of the Beerhall Putsch, in the Storming of the Capitol. The first time a tragedy, the second time a farce...at the nth time, the transmission now stands in for the event. But behind this orgy of world-historical (in)significance, the agenda of redemption of the hyperreal continued nonplussed. So the Democrat win is confirmed: President, House, and Senate.

***Logout***

Trump. Ctrl+Alt+Delete

Hopefully.

***Unfinished business***

For Baudrillard, America constitutes the “finished form of the future catastrophe of the social” (1988, p. 5).

Wishful thinking.

There is nothing *finished* about it. The catastrophe continues to unfold. It goes on and on. If only it were finished.

***All quiet on the Western front***

Since Biden took office, it has all gone so quiet. America, hello? are you still there?

\*

**Coda**

Allen Shelton

***Notes Moving Towards a Question***

1. When Baudrillard’s *America* appeared, I assigned it to a class of undergraduates who were excited to read and think with this travel diary and were still excited about it after reading it. Pieces of this book show up in an essay I produced in 1998 when I arrived in Buffalo. The essay is titled “The Heart and Other Organs of Darkness.” I would come close to meeting him at a small conference outside Las Vegas where apparently, he sat at a piano and played songs like he was a lounge singer. The author is now dead but this book and others by him are still very alive on Amazon but here at Buffalo State College, except for a handful of students, he and this book are very dead.

2. One of the reasons I assigned *America* this semester is a sociologist at Lancaster University raved about how much his undergraduate students love the book and were using it as a model for writing short episodic pieces; something he had seen here with students using my work and *Ordinary Affects* (2007) around 2008. Somehow in his hands, at that place, with those students, *America* and my own project were alive. Another explanation may be that Baudrillard, a visitor from another country requires more knowledge of America to read than Americans have. Stewart requires at least some background theoretical knowledge and an appreciation for a style of writing. What does a normal sociological class require? It may be a movement to what Baudrillard calls the vanishing point.

3. Last year sitting in a hip café late in the afternoon, a young woman and someone who has taken several classes with me asked “how does it feel to be an antique?” The question which materialized out of her reading of Jean Baudrillard’s *The System of Objects* didn’t surprise me. Baudrillard describes an antique as something that has survived, a reminder of another place and time. I’ve been considering the question for several years. After living with and devoting much energy to preserving various antiques I’ve inherited, was there a metamorphosis occurring in which I was beginning to resemble my grandmother’s table, the Swedish axes propped up against the wall in the corner, or my grandfather’s books? What did give me pause was how likely others wouldn’t connect what she said to Baudrillard or to my own work where antiques abound and in particular to a scene where evangelists locate the source of my demonic possession in my system of objects and collection of books; but to my oddness as a professor who assigns books and writing, another kind of demonic possession in the current pedagogical forcefield. My feeling of being an antique was intensified by a different student in class jabbing at me “are you a real professor.” It was a question to which she already had an answer. This is the kind of scene Stewart avoids in her documentation of ordinary affects.

4. It may be that in Buffalo State College classrooms an entirely new kind of discipline, person, and capitalist phase is occurring as one set of sets is replaced by another; all moving invisibly, silently, almost naturally at different rates of speed. In 1976 I got an F on a forty-page paper for a handful of spelling errors. The only comment was “on a paper this size footnotes are needed.” Baudrillard may be right “objects are closer than they appear.”

5. When I wrote this paper, I was in my first semester of my graduate work though I had been thinking about it for at least a year waiting for the opportunity to write it. None of the books I used had been assigned in a class. Instead of heralding a new ecological change, my paper was a remainder from a disappearing world.

6. If I were to stop this story sequence at its three points; me as an undergraduate in 1976, the assigning of *America* in 1990, and in Buffalo State College classrooms in 2020, I would have three zones vibrating with ordinary affect that may or may not be the same wavelength. Stewart’s documentation of America occurs in a tight historical window. Would the image on the cover of her book exist in other time zones: in other kinds of spaces outside the contemporary suburbs?

7. It may be wrong to describe Stewart’s book as contemporary much less Baudrillard’s book which was first published in 1986. For many the beginning of history is anchored in their own childhood. Few things before that dead zone (a concept used by Stephen King to describe the vision world of a high school teacher who has recovered from a near fatal crash and a long coma who can see the past and futures of an individual he touches) exist. Movies stop. Music stops. History is scrambled. The birthdate is like a wall. This ruthless present rubs against standard contemporary theory courses where texts from the 1950s and 1960s are often assigned. Mills writing in 1959 is an ancient figure. He knew individuals who had knew Freud and Weber. Baudrillard was born before World War Two. Stewart could’ve gone to Woodstock. If these two authors aren’t contemporary who is?

8. The only sociology book from my undergraduate career to have survived is on my shelf in my office is titled *False Promises* by Stanley Aronowitz, who first introduced me to Marcuse. Its spine is broken in half. I discovered Stewart’s first book *The Space on the Side of the Road* when it was used to critique my work on affect and the South. I knew Baudrillard in graduate school. He wasn’t assigned. I read him on my own. I no longer remember how I found him. Patrik, the subject of my book *The North Sea* knew his work as well.

***Assigned question***

Compare Baudrillard’s and Stewart’s portraits of America across these five dimensions: the narrative/writing strategies employed, choices and representations of places and actors, historical coordinates that configure the texts, the unconscious or underneath that may or **may not want the authors’ representations** (this is not what I intended to write. I was unaware of the mistake until a student asked me what I meant. I’ve decided to leave it. It’s an artifice produced by the voice program I use to type with. It might be read as an example of a nonhuman intelligence, an AI interfacing with my sentences to take over or redirect my intentions. In the past this would be an example of automatic writing where the dead have taken control of the pencil. It could also be indicative that affect is not entirely human. The sentence should have read, “may or may not have been part of the authors’ representations”), speed and its effects to arrive at what is a contemporary sociology in America.

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