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FROM SUPERHIGHWAY TO HYPERREALITY: THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF "ASTRAL AMERICA"

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During a series of road-trips undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s, the French theorist Jean Baudrillard encountered an American Southwest that had become a laboratory of "hyperreality." What was real and what merely represented the real had become indistinguishable from one another, so much that the very environment appeared to conform to myths of US American destiny, and not the other way around. This "Astral America" extended to the deserts, suburbs, and sprawling metropoli of the former frontier, and was to be found in the "marvelously affectless succession of signs, images, faces, and ritual acts on the road" (Baudrillard 5). Ostensibly in the US in an academic capacity, Baudrillard proudly forewent libraries and lecture halls in favor of his private automobile, which he piloted through the desert at high speed, taking in the swirling housing tracts, strip-malls, motels, and other roadside simulacra of the American dream. Not being native to them, Baudrillard could see in these spaces what otherwise eluded his American colleagues, who had turned their backs on them "as the Greeks turned their back on the sea" (63).

Baudrillard's observations about Astral America were published in 1986 as *Amérique* (trans. 1988 as *America*). Throughout this work of travelogue-theory, Baudrillard claims the perspective of an outside observer, but he exhibits an enthusiasm for the road that is characteristically American, if not at-times stereotypically so. Baudrillard's philosophizing from behind the wheel has become a touchstone in automobility studies. Cotten Seiler approaches *America* as a deliberate engagement with the "capacious, supranational, even imperial subjectivity organized by the apparatus of automobility"— that is, the discourses and infrastructures that aligned the fact of driving a car with a hegemonic idea of what it meant to be a “free” American (Seiler 9). Meanwhile, John Urry turns to Baudrillard for evidence of automobility as a system that “coerces people into an intense flexibility” (Urry 28). Marcin Mazurek and Justin Michael Battin (2021) introduced a recent special issue of this journal, on car cultures, with a quote from *America*. Despite the palpable pleasure Baudrillard takes in driving, his book remains a crucial early entry in the critical literature on automobility and its relationship to the spatiotemporal regimes of postmodernity or late capitalism.

America also serves as an important text to begin interrogating a problem that has gone less understood: the relationship between postmodern theory and automobility’s infrastructures as such. Postmodernism as a Western cultural movement is roughly coeval with the construction of the grand edifice of the postwar American automobilization project, the Interstate Highway System, 1956 to 1992. Perry Anderson (1998) traces the term “postmodernism” back to the fifties, while Fredric Jameson (1991) publishes his treatise on “the cultural logic of late capitalism” shortly before the interstate is declared complete. Another major account, by David Harvey (1990), dates the emergence of postmodernism/postmodernity to 1973–74. One of the major inflection points that Harvey considers, the OPEC oil embargo, catalyzed capitalism’s restructuring around flexible and global forms of accumulation. Furthermore, in the US in particular, it brought the ideal of the petroleum-powered good life into crisis, just as the interstate highway was solidifying the private car’s supremacy. The largest public infrastructure project in American history, the 75,000-kilometer interstate bound the nation in a vast network that, in addition to making large swaths of the continental US traversable by private automobile, helped literally to concretize a national auto-*mobile* character. Being American became synonymous with adapting to and participating in the transport regime enshrined in the proliferation of freeways and expressways. At the time Baudrillard was conducting his motorized fieldwork, American culture was confronting a reality of petroleum scarcity amidst the continued growth of a monumental superhighway system that projected confidence in the automotive future. The US’s hyperreal self-production was suddenly nowhere more salient than aboard the nation’s highways.

A critical infrastructural approach invites a reconsideration of *America* and its contribution to automobility studies through the lens of another major theme of the book: energy. Baudrillard’s text opens inroads into understanding post-structuralism as a form of what Timothy Mitchell calls “petroknowledge” (Mitchell 139), an episteme that hinges on cheap and abundant fossil fuels. Although fuel shortages, green technologies, and ecological movements have challenged this episteme, petroknowledge continues to structure a broad notion of modernity and its privileges, from cosmopolitanism to representative democracy. Theory itself might be said to be a petroknowledge, an analysis that *America* encourages with its exuberant descriptions of highway driving. Rereading Baudrillard's *America* against the discursive and material conditions of the period in the history of American automobility in which it appears proposes an infrastructural account of the postmodern moment.

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America begins in the Southwest: "not social and cultural America, but the America of the empty, absolute freedom of the freeways, not the deep America of mores and mentalities, but the America of desert speed, of motels and mineral surfaces" (5). Baudrillard moves quickly between several desert sites, which are, in practice, quite far away from one another: San Antonio, Salt Lake City, the Salk Institute in Torrey Pines, which Baudrillard incorrectly identifies as "Torrey Canyon," the name of the BP tanker that ran aground off the southwestern coast of England in 1967. Conflating Europe's worst oil spill with the research institute named for the discoverer of the polio vaccine, Baudrillard makes the kind of error that the global petroleum trade renders inevitable: a ship built in the US, registered in Liberia, but bearing the name of a characteristically American geological formation, transporting oil extracted in Kuwait, which ultimately contaminates French beaches.

The topic of energy haunts *America* from the beginning and forms what might be called, following Dominic Boyer, the text's "epistemic infrastructure" (Boyer 238). Specific regimes of energy consumption and extraction make possible the hyperreality that Baudrillard analyzes, as well as his means of analysis. Adriana Michele Campos Johnson and Daniel Nemser have recently called for an infrastructural critique that expands "what it might mean to conjugate reading and infrastructure: reading as infrastructure, reading infrastructure, and readings of infrastructure" (Johnson and Nemser 4). *America* makes for a compelling case study with which examine these conjugations. Its reading of the American road has become, in its way, an infrastructure of reading—that is, a point of departure that has helped structure a field of inquiry. Furthermore, the semiotic abstraction and circulation that characterize hyperreality are presented in *America* as processes that are best theorized from within their infrastructural environments. The theorist E. Cram proposes to think infrastructure as "land lines" that mark "entrenched social beliefs about how to *make* and *convert* energy for proper, productive use" (Cram 7, italics in original). In *America*, the insatiable consumption of energy required by the communities of the Southwest is counterbalanced by Baudrillard's own enthusiastic burning of fossil fuel toward what is imagined to be a more productive end—reaching the physical and intellectual velocity at which one can perceive Astral America for what it is.

Destinations are secondary in *America*. The site that first interests Baudrillard is the intermediary space of the automobile highway, whose uncanny combination of "desert speed" and roadside mundanities becomes the starting point of his investigation into Astral America. Baudrillard pushes past the frontier wilds that delimited Alexis de Tocqueville's journey a century and a half earlier and drives onto "the flat, empty, perpetual-motion surface of the desert" (Diani 76). The flatness of the desert turns the highway into a runway, creating an almost limitless sense of speed. "Speed creates pure objects," writes Baudrillard. "[…] Speed is the triumph of effect over cause, the triumph of instantaneity over time as depth, the triumph of the surface and pure objectality over the profundity of desire" (6). American hyperreality is the outcome of a particular disarticulation of signifier and signified, in which images, myths, and signs outrun the reality they ostensibly refer to. In Baudrillard's analysis, it is as much a geological as technological phenomenon. Later, he declares: "The natural deserts tell me what I need to know about the deserts of the sign. They teach me to read surface and movement and geology and immobility at the same time" (67). The conjunction of automobile infrastructure and natural landscape renders the plains of the American west legible as a kind of plane of immanence.

What sets Baudrillard's account of the US apart from those by other French thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Cau, and George Duhamel is "his refusal to condemn: fascination wins in the end," notes Jean-Philippe Mathy (Mathy 279). Indeed, Baudrillard emphasizes firsthand experience over and above critical distance. "Driving is a spectacular form of amnesia," he riffs. "Everything is to be discovered, everything to be obliterated" (9). The "excessive, pitiless distance" (9) of the road enables a velocity that is at once physical and cognitive, and in the driver's seat, one comes to inhabit the late-capitalist American psyche—all the better to theorize it. For Baudrillard, driving a car is foremost a means of confronting "the form that dominates the American West, and doubtless all of American culture": "a fractal, interstitial culture, born of a rift with the Old World, a tactile, fragile, mobile, superficial culture—you have to follow its own rules to grasp how it works: seismic shifting, soft technologies" (10). Such cultural rules are given immediate expression in the rules of the road. Traffic signs—with their directive that drivers "must exit"—"read like a litany," he writes (53). When one learns the litanies of the road, one participates in an "unspoken agreement on collective driving" that tells you "more about this society than all academia could ever tell you" (54). To fixate on the forms of coercion on the road is to miss the way that automobile infrastructure remediates unfreedom into a profound new feeling of liberty, the "empty, absolute freedom of the freeways" (5). It is no surprise that Baudrillard's road should be the "freeway," one of several possible translations for the more capacious *autoroute*.

Throughout *America*, physical mobility becomes a sort of intellectual mobility, which drives Baudrillard's journey away from a world of binaries and out onto the open road of post-structuralism. Baudrillard first became interested in the automobile for the way it penetrated postwar French society, swiftly becoming "inscribed in everyday society as an object or appliance" (Cofaigh 208). France's roads were slow to adapt to *la auto*. Meanwhile, American automobility was better configured to activate driving's emancipatory affect. As many critics have observed, the private motorcar enables the quotidian commute and its escape at the same time. In her groundbreaking cultural study of automobility, Kristin Ross argues that Baudrillard became enamored with this latter, liberating form of driving that haunts its domesticated counterpart. The speed that one could more reliably attain aboard American highways had "the effect of propelling the driver off the calendar, out of one's own personal and affective history, and out of time itself" (Ross 21). Both forms of automobility—the commute and the escape—are present in *America*, without much distinction. Passages of traversing the desert blend with scenes of navigating developed areas, such as Los Angeles. Unlike European motorways, which are "places of expulsion," Los Angeles's "freeway system is a place of integration": "There is something of the freedom of movement that you have in the desert here, and indeed Los Angeles, with its extensive structure, is merely an inhabited fragment of the desert" (Baudrillard 53). Even amidst the urban traffic of Southern California, the motorist in the United States retains some kind of freedom; if not the freedom to get around as speedily as you like, then the more rarified freedom to be integrated into a circulatory system.

America demands a reassessment of theory's emancipatory ambitions *via* the infrastructures, be they transport or institutional, that make theorizing possible in the first place. Petroleum-powered desert speed may be a means of approaching the abstraction that defines postmodern American culture, but it comes at the expense of any interest in embodied experience other than Baudrillard's own. Baudrillard's America "is a country without persons—not one is introduced—and for that matter without people, these having been absorbed into his theories of hyperreality and simulation," noted one critical review of the book's translation (Poirier). In the Southwest, humanity registers in references to "Mexicans who have crossed the border clandestinely to come and work here" (2) and "the extermination of the desert Indians" (6). Baudrillard's brief account of New York City unfortunately dwells on "the sexual stimulation produced by the crowding together of so many races" (15), before the much-mocked observation: "There are no cops in New York" (22). Meanwhile, the broad category of "Americans" is invoked to mean a group of noble savages whose ignorance of the hyperreality in which they live make them ideal subjects for the European theorist. Americans "are the ideal material for an analysis of all the possible variants of the modern world. No more and no less in fact than were primitive societies in their day" (29).

The literal deterritorialization and reterritorialization of people in service of the US's violent westward push is grist for the mill of Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. Just as it did in different periods of settler-colonial expansion, the continental United States offers a telos, which strikes Baudrillard as prophetic. The monumental verticality of New York City gradually gets dismantled as one moves west and alights on the delirious horizontality of the desert metropolis of Los Angeles. The cities of the future, he predicts, will have no place left to go but underground, a "subterranean implosion" of the skyscraper ambitions of the early twentieth century, in which "[e]verything will become infrastructure bathed in light of energy" (21–22). Baudrillard is hardly the first to note the American Southwest's uncanny interpenetration of the hostile and the up-to-the-minute. Architects were fascinated by the vernacular building styles emerging in Los Angeles (Banham) and Las Vegas (Venturi et al.), while Andy Warhol once said, recounting a cross-country road-trip: "The further west we drove on the highway, the more Pop everything looked" (qtd. in Avila 122). Rachel Adams (2007) has argued for the importance of the Southern California region for thinking postmodernism as an international, even global phenomenon. LA's swift transformation, from the *noirish* metropolis of Hollywood cinema to what Edward Soja calls "the centrifugal ur-Exopolis" (239), evinced a social organization that seemed ready to spin out of the basin and run roughshod over the world. Although Baudrillard also speaks of centrifuges in *America*, the motion that he associates with hyperreality is more often like the desert itself.

His Astral America is a dry zone creeping irreversibly and indifferently into previously verdant regions.

Desert-like creep describes at once the spread of American cultural hegemony and the climactic effects resulting from the processes of extraction and infrastructure development that make the American Southwest a laboratory of the hyperreal in the first place. A series of infamous energy crises had precipitated the publication of *America* and exposed the fragility of a way of life predicated on unsustainable material entanglements. The so-called Arab oil embargo, which sent gas prices skyrocketing in late 1973, created the first modern crisis of American automobility by attaching a previously unthinkable price tag to the freedom to get around whenever and however you chose. The embargo opened the door to fresh fears about individual and national sovereignty. One political misstep, and OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) could bring the American automotive transportation system to its knees; one irreparable link in the infrastructure, and the middle-class utopias of the Southwest reverted to a wasteland.

As Matthew Huber (2013) argues, the energy crises of the 1970s called into question a mode of social reproduction that had relied on an oil-fueled mastery of an oil-fueled landscape of production and consumption. The gas station lines and outbreaks of violence during the 1973–74 embargo and its sequel, the Oil Shock of 1979, dramatized the nation's hegemonic decline in its perceived inability to bring Arab nations to heel. Meanwhile, the sudden restriction in mobility that many Americans faced revealed a grim limitation to the midcentury production of space: modern life depended utterly on one kind of vehicle powered by resources extracted beyond American borders. Huber contends that the finitude and fixity of petroleum as a resource caused a crack up in conventional economic wisdom, and anti-New Deal (or neoliberal) ideologues exploited the climate of suspicion born from the energy crises to push an anti-statist agenda that took centerstage with the election of the first openly hyperreal president, Ronald Reagan.

Over the 1970s, the relationship that many middle-class Americans had with gasoline consumption was upended, prompting a national reckoning with the United States' image of itself. In February 1974, at the height of the embargo, US Senator Ted Kennedy posed the following question during hearings on the automotive industry held by the Senate Committee on the Judiciary: "Are all the problems [Americans] are facing today merely the result of an Arab oil embargo? Or shouldn't we, in a country that is unsurpassed in technological expertise, have been able to develop alternative means of transportation which would contribute to the safety, health, and the well-being of our citizens as well as our economy?" (United States. Cong. Committee on the Judiciary. 1775). The hearings led to policies aimed to encourage reinvestment in mass transit and the purchasing of more fuel-efficient automobiles; but the construction of the interstate proceeded largely in accordance with its then two-decade-old plan. Nothing like the robust alternatives imagined by Kennedy came to pass, and the nation was caught off guard again a few years later.

Kennedy's bewilderment helps crystallize the infrastructural dimensions of American hyperreality. American narratives of innovation, expertise, and technological progress fail to square with a fundamentally constraining mobility system and an unsustainable regime of energy consumption. The ideological crisis provoked by material crises gets resolved by cleaving self-image from reality and plunging society into hyperreality. Such cleavage is a form of "hysteresis": "the process whereby something continues to develop by inertia, whereby an effect persists even when its cause has disappeared" (Baudrillard 115). Hysteresis certainly describes the autopoietic quality that Urry ascribes to the system of automobility—that is, the material-cultural car complex's ability to generate the conditions for its own global expansion. It likewise describes how infrastructures help abstract and circulate cultural values while protecting them from the crises that these same infrastructures produce. Astral America is a place where cultural systems are not undone by contradiction but fueled by them, while hyperreality grows and takes hold thanks to infrastructural systems that have become as naturalized as the deserts they traverse.

The energy infrastructures that pique Baudrillard's curiosity are often those that give dimension to the relationship between the US's utopian self-presentation and its attitude toward energy. New York City's brazen daily consumption of electricity "protects it, like a galvanic dome, from all external threats—though not from internal accidents like the black-out of '76" (Baudrillard 22). Of course, the massive blackout Baudrillard has in mind occurred in 1977, although the fact that America's metropolis could ever be under repeated *internal* threat on or around the nation's bicentenary, whether by power failures or by serial killers like the Son of Sam, is yet another of the deliriums that Baudrillard writes into being.

Back in the Southwest, he observers a similar, always-on-quality to American life: neon-signs along the highway, TVs left on all night, air-conditioning blasting in empty Las Vegas hotels, skylines lit up for whoever may be awake in the middle of the night. "The glory of American power is most often described as an effect of freedom and its exercise," Baudrillard writes. "But freedom does not of itself generate power" (89). American freedom as the inalienable right to consume cannot generate its own conditions and rather depends on military might and various degrees of overt and covert coercion: oil secured through war and dispossession, infrastructures that serve capital first and foremost, a way of life strapped into the commodity of the private automobile. As Baudrillard notes later in the book, American culture produced its own "virgin territory" (99) when it exterminated the indigenous populations of the continent and covered up the crime, effectively rendering space "infinite by the destruction of its center" (99). The audacious using-up of energy speaks to the same ambition: the desire to water the desert until it somehow sprouts grass, or to escape the drudgery of the daily commute—in one's car, of course.

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Over the course of *America*, Baudrillard's melodrama of seduction by Astral America stages the power of hyperreality. A world of freely circulating myths can offer shelter from unpleasant circumstances; at the very least, it might be intellectually stimulating for the right kind of European theorist. At the same time, Baudrillard's eager love affair with the automobile speaks to the extent to which questions of material history all too easily took the backseat, so to speak, in the postmodern intellectual moment. In 1979, Baudrillard's contemporary, Jean-François Lyotard, proposed an infrastructural periodizing of modernity: "It is reasonable to suppose that the proliferation of information-processing machines is having, and will continue to have, as much an effect on the circulation of learning as did advancements in human circulation (transportation systems) and later, in the circulation of sounds and visual images (the media)" (Lyotard 4). This genealogy—transport, then media, then computers— subordinates industrial infrastructures to post-industrial ones, all while overlooking the massive and even accelerated expansion of transport infrastructures happening concurrently. In France, for instance, the 1970s were a period when the nation's *autoroute* system was taking shape and when the SNCF was developing its high-speed TGV trains. As the circulation of images and information comes to dazzle, the energy-intensive circulation of people and goods sinks into the space of epistemic infrastructure.

Baudrillard's project is, of course, not to historicize the hyperreal climate of the late-capitalist United States, but to hystericize it, to paraphrase Diane Rubenstein (597). Nevertheless, his own apparent desire to propel himself out of history in his car has an unsettling foil in the terminal quality of American transport infrastructure,

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which currently appears unlikely to be superseded by any potentially greener, rail-based alternative. In the words of Stephanie LeMenager, "petroleum infrastructure has become embodied memory and habitus for modern humans" (LeMenager 104). Automobility continues to bind Americans to a vision of the good life whose central claim to liberty must weather ever more challenges: traffic, public divestment, gasoline shortages, climate catastrophe.

Might Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality still have relevance for this state of affairs? In many ways, the leveling of cause and effect, of simulation and reality, that is the basis of an analysis of the hyperreal likewise encourages a leveling of culture and infrastructure. Built infrastructure ceases to be a backdrop against which social dramas play out but instead enters into question in its own right. Michael Truscello argues that "forms of deterritorialization and reterritorialization must be part of resistance to infrastructural brutalism"—that is, the policies of maintaining and expanding the extractive infrastructure driving the planet to mass extinction (Truscello 31). The novelty with which Baudrillard treats the infrastructural environments he traverses in *America* might be carried forward in a critical project that highlights what is strange, estranging, and contingent about the material systems that help produce our reality, whether hyper- or otherwise.

Abstract: During a series of road-trips undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s, the French theorist Jean Baudrillard encountered an American West that had become a laboratory of hyperreality. In his observations about "Astral America," Baudrillard claims the perspective of an outside observer, but he exhibits a fascination for the space of the road that is characteristically American, if not at-times stereotypically so, begging the question: what is the link between postmodern theory and automobile infrastructure? This article interrogates the material and discursive relations between Baudrillard's *Amérique* (1986; trans. 1988) and the period in the history of American automobility in which it emerges. Just as the Interstate Highway was solidifying the private car's supremacy, the OPEC oil embargo brought the petroleum-powered, automobile ideal of the good life into crisis, opening intellectual inroads for thinking the US's hyperreal self-production while aboard the nation's superhighways. Baudrillard's classic work of travelogue-theory invites an infrastructural account of the postmodern moment that would situate concepts from French theory and their uptake in the American academy within a context of transnationally mediated transport infrastructures.

Keywords: Infrastructure, automobility, postmodernism, hyperreality, French theory

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