

# Traveling and Postculturality: Baudrillard Revisited

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## 1. Introduction

Jean Baudrillard's *America* problematizes space and place through travel by inverting, deconstructing, and even destroying the reader's ideas of the actual geographical place and inevitably blurring the concepts of "space" and "place", allowing America to evanesce before the reader's eyes. Paradoxically, Baudrillard's travel immerses in America, creating a "sidereal" distance to the extent that it becomes a parody of not just the object of travel but of traveling and the self *en route*. He, however, reminds us that the bleak view he offers of America is fiction:

"Let me specify that *America* should not be read as a realist text. Its subject matter being a fiction itself, I've exaggerated this quality, without actually entering into science fiction. It's no longer possible to write about Europe in this way. I've no wish to conceal the element of defiance and artificiality within my sort of fictionizing" (Baudrillard 1993: 132).

He enters America as fiction (Baudrillard 1988: 133) and writes about it as fiction "repeat[ing] the object of its parody whilst introducing an ironic distance in its repetition" (Laügt 2012: 343), intending it to be a parody: "I *play out* the end of things, I offer a complete parody" (Baudrillard 1993: 132-133).

Baudrillard's view of hyperreality has critical implications for understanding cultural space in a postmodern world as he raises questions about the habitation of space and place and, in particular, about traveling and cultural space in relation to the traveler. Traveling as a metaphor for being represents the disruption between the inhabiting subject and place as (cultural) space becomes rapidly changing, due to both technologization and inner fractalization.

Traveling can be seen as post-cultural existence, signifying detachment from cultural space and exerting radical critique through non-fixity and distance. It is this implication of traveling that the paper explores, identifying some consequences for cultural space and contending that traveling signifies a post-cultural activity.

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## 2. Baudrillard and the evanescence of space in travel

Much as Jean Baudrillard's travelogue across America revolves around American geographical places understood by him as spatial metaphors often seemingly deployed in contrast to European sites, one cannot but feel that his fictional America represents a space of Western modernity either in a metonymic way or as a dystopian future space – a “‘travel shot’ of cultures and their destiny” (Baudrillard 2001: 43) in Marshall McLuhan's footsteps. The work is thus not a particular critique of American cultural space in the first place but, much rather, a probe into hyperreal simulation and the performativity of traveling including repercussions for the traveler's identity. Unlike, by way of contrast, Roland Barthes's travel notes *Empire of Signs*, which epitomizes the absolute difference between the traveler's gaze and the Orient “paralys[ing] the translatable, domesticatable, and comparable qualities of linguistic representation” (Sharp 2002: 164), yet surmounting the incommensurability into a referential narrative of self-study (*ibidem*: 157), space described by Baudrillard as desertified proves non-different and accounts for traveling as non-referential, which undermines the concept of “difference” as referential. While traveling for Barthes holds “the possibility of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic systems” (Barthes 1992: 3-4), i.e., it unveils a space of fracture, where “travel produces the Other” and secures a “site of presence” (Stratton 1990: 86-87), in which both the presence and lack yet evince referentiality, for Baudrillard, instead of “an infinite series of differences” (Calvete 2019: 186), difference dissipates and the traveler evanesces from both the environment and the very own self, creating a “horror vacui” (Eco 1989: 8) and turning traveling into a simulacrum.

Baudrillard's traveling must be seen as a metaphor in two ways. First, it maps the space of hypermodernity through the spatial image of the desert that symbolizes for Baudrillard the result of hypermodern technological processes, but, more specifically, the medialized, televisional, and consequently, fictional processes that overwrite space being a sign in an “uncontested mythical hyperreality” (Kooijman 2013: 74). The grand symbol of the desert embodies a space in which entities merge into one homogenized whole, deteriorated as in deterritorialized through losing distinguishing contours – in an inverted way, it also manifests both the recognition of “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard 1984: xxiv) and the establishment of the metanarrative of technologized simulation, another order of “a totalising machine” (Calvete 2019: 174). The acceleration of information, at the same time, provides for the “speed of sound as pure superficiality” (Baudrillard 1988: 4) as

“Speed creates pure objects. It is itself a pure object, since it cancels out the ground and territorial reference-points, since it runs ahead of time to annul time itself, since it moves more quickly than its own cause and obliterates that cause by outstripping it. Speed is the triumph of effect over cause, the triumph

of instantaneity over time as depth, the triumph of the surface arid pure objectality over the profundity of desire” (*ibidem*: 6).

Technologization and its rate disturb the relation between signifier and signified, disemboweling the signifier and leaving the signifier hollow – a deterritorialized sign (see Deleuze and Guattari 2000: 206). Baudrillard describes the loosening of the relation as an “orgy of liberation, [...] orgy of indifference, disconnection, exhibition, and circulation,” which refers to the short-circuited, endless reproduction and the annulation of differences due to the demotivation of entities “unmoored from their social signifiers” (Appadurai 2005: 31). In permanent acceleration, entities of space appear in constant juxtaposition losing their capability to serve as differentials and orientating reference points – in Lyotard’s sense, the decline of narrative leads to delegitimation (Lyotard 1984: 37) as “[t]he acceleration of molecules in the heat contributes to a barely perceptible evaporation of meaning” (Baudrillard 1988: 9).

In a subversive move, America as a product of desertification is presented as simulation and its image, the desert as the “precession of simulacra” (Baudrillard 1994: 1). As he describes elsewhere,

“the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials – worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real [. . .]” (*ibidem*: 2).

As such, the desert does not reflect reality anymore, as it “fabricate[s] the absolute fake” (Eco 1989: 8), and cannot be regarded as its representation as a result of “hyperreal decontextualisation” (Calvete 2019: 188). Rather, as he claims regarding simulacra: they do not even mask “the *absence* of a profound reality” anymore as “[they have] no relation to any reality whatsoever” (Baudrillard 1994: 6). Second, as traveling presumes the existence of the traveler, Baudrillard’s pessimistic scheme sheds light on the identity of the traveler. As space and places merge into a non-differentiated, non-referential whole through “a radical evacuation of all of the heaviness, weight, and inertia of [their] own culture” (Baudrillard and Guillaume 2008: 85), the traveler merges into this space, becoming symptomatic of it; in fact, in “the irony of the regression of the human being in the face of technical progress” (Gane 1991: 41) the traveler “becomes an abstraction” (*ibidem*: 41). The traveler is just another non-entity in the precession as a product of simulation and through the gaze reproducing the precession itself. So while in the circulation of simulation, the desert represents “the purified form of social desertification” with “disaffection find[ing] its pure form in the barrenness of speed” (Baudrillard 1988: 5) – the technologized and medialized environment in which the traveler is produced

– the traveler’s gaze appears to project itself onto the environment, through which the circuit of simulation becomes complete:

“The desert is a natural extension of the inner silence of the body. If humanity’s language, technology, and buildings are an extension of its constructive faculties, the desert alone is an extension of its capacity for absence, the ideal schema of humanity’s disappearance” (*ibidem*: 68).

In the circuit of production and reproduction, the traveler becomes an object in the hyperreal void, and, concomitantly, constructs/amends the space of traveling through his / her hyperreal gaze. As Baudrillard states in *Radical Alterity* about traveling: “The voyage itself and therefore absence, which is also an absence to yourself, take charge” (Baudrillard and Guillaume 2008: 83).

Much as Baudrillard treats the travel across America as fiction in / across a fictional place, and his writing as “fictionizing” (Baudrillard 1993: 132), his work carries over into thinking about space and place. Baudrillard’s concept of “traveling” turns places into non-places for the reason that places are not able to represent identity rooted in time and space – traveling resulting in absence, transparent memories, and “no stopping point” (Baudrillard and Guillaume 2008: 85). Places have been understood as places of habitation and the expression of the embodied subject, through whose place-constructing activity places can symbolize the self (see Cooper 1974). Accordingly, space unfolds in direct relation to the subject and, thus, traveling is seen as, in a Heideggerian coinage, dedistancing, i.e., space is revealed in being at hand for the traveler. Much like Edwin Ardener conceptualizes space as a result of “textualization” (2012: 527) and “linguification” (2007: 103), the gaze of the observer semantizes “space” – as a filter of “habitus”. The latter concept indicates the accumulation of experiences and expectations into “internalised structures” and “schemes of perception” (Bourdieu 1977: 86) – a sense of spatiality, of location in space.

In the hypermodern, such rootedness in space gets deconstructed by non-places as the traveler’s existence signifies a non-place as well: “The traveller’s space may thus be the archetype of non-place” (Augé 1995: 86). As Marc Augé argues, “If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (*ibidem*: 77-78). The constant juxtaposition of entities including the traveler in the “circulation” and “circumvolution” of traveling (Baudrillard and Guillaume 2008: 83) disables dedistancing as movement between entities conceived as significant can function as referentials also in the sense that they could help demarcate the contours of the traveler. Traveling then may be seen rather as floating – the traveler “strolls along his *route*” (Augé 1995: 107) – since it lacks directionality, and the circuit of endless juxtaposition represents the merging of entities into a non-space, where the deindividuated entities fail to motivate the individuality of the traveler due to non-referentiality and the traveler’s gaze

“fictional relationship between gaze and landscape” (*ibidem*: 86) – the process of desertification Baudrillard talks about.

While simulation for Baudrillard signifies the end of history, non-places for Augé produce a “world [...] surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral” (Augé 1995: 78) appearing at certain locales in social space. Yet both share simulacra-like qualities. Augé’s conception of “solitary individuality” does not simply signify a lack of fixity or rootedness in space. Just the contrary, whereas lack of fixity may yet represent rootedness in space, non-places represent detachment from space, inscribing the body of the traveler as non-place and traveling as non-referential. Rootedness in space through traveling resurfaces for Augé through the image of the passenger who is “defined by his destination” (*ibidem*: 107). It is well characterized by tribal nomadism, where movement becomes a signifying activity, which maps or rather inscribes space in a culturally meaningful way. It is important to note here that nomadism is from an anthropological point of view a field of significance. As, for example, Nancy D. Munn’s description of “negative spaces” indicates, “spatial prohibitions” influence the movement of Australian Aborigines through space “as a mode of boundary making” (Munn 2003: 93). The process, however, does not denote negation; rather, the movement of bodies avoiding certain places describe the “locatedness” of “situated bodies” in interaction with these places in the form of detour (*ibidem*: 94). As opposed to such a space demarcated by movement, “[t]he space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude” (Augé 1995: 103), meaning that the non-places of supermodernity do not offer the possibility of connectedness with the result of disembeddedness.

### 3. Travel, place, and postculturality

Independent of to what extent Baudrillard intends his travel notes about “America as fiction” (Baudrillard 1988: 29) to be parody, which may ultimately undermine implications for reality, inevitably, the hypermodern acceleration of social and cultural transformation in Western societies bears relevance for cultural discourses. As the accelerated rate of social / cultural transformations may result in evanescent cultural borders and deconstructed cultural metanarratives, multiplicities and polyphonies may claim space, rendering cultural space inescapably heterotopic. In heterotopic juxtaposition, the linguified texture of cultural space – a sign of territorial thinking – may become liquified. Based on Baudrillard and Augé, traveling as existence *en route* indicates that place is threatened by placelessness as “[...] the desert is [...] an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance” (*ibidem*: 5), turning cultural space into a disembodied entity. It does not present a network of places interconnected by the signifying movement of travelers but “a space devoid of obvious cultural identity” (Brogden 2019: 3). Baudrillard’s proposal questions space’s ability to contain communities as the failure of inscription of space

can be regarded not just as absence but also as cultural erasure. In Baudrillard's footsteps, desertification as deterioration or erosion of the cultural space through extensive multiplicity and multiplication may mark the end of (cultural) space.

Collapse may be interpreted as restructuring or reinvention as, for example, for Arjun Appadurai the globalizing processes of "scapes", denoting fluidity and irregularity (2005: 33), mark deterritorialization through the movement across boundaries with the result that "[t]he loosening of the holds between people, wealth, and territories fundamentally alters the basis of cultural reproduction" (*ibidem*: 49). While for Appadurai deterritorialization appears to demarcate a new territory of globalization, for Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari deterritorialization refers to "declension" (2000: 146), "division" (*ibidem*: 195), or "displacement" (*ibidem*: 231) and in that to the schizophrenic nature of decoding as in non-referential abstraction, flow and floating in place of territorialization, ultimately the "destroying the code as such, assigning it an archaic, folkloric, or residual function" (*ibidem*: 245). Much as the code might also offer the possibility of rhizomatic reterritorialization especially since the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization are always relative and connected (Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 10), deterritorialization leads to disarticulation (Deleuze and Guattari 2000: 232) with the result that "the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities pushing the deterritorialization ever further" (Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 10).

The ongoing, overarching presentism of deterritorialization is reasserted by Baudrillard when discussing radical alterity in traveling:

"You are always traveling but there is no more resistance or any landings. There is a constant deterritorialization with an obvious need to pass from one territory to another because this type of voyage consumes its own space; it needs constant renewal" (Baudrillard and Guillaume 2008: 84).

The compulsion of travel simultaneously effecting and signifying deterritorialization marks placelessness – meaning paradoxically from the point of view of cultural space that it is non-identical with itself as habitation of space dissolves in traveling. Due to the inner fractalization, i.e., desertification through multiplication, traveling lacking directionality does not result in habitation as significant, referential difference disappears in renewal.

In this scheme, the juxtaposition of cultures in heterotopic urban spaces also questions cultural diversity as a denotation of the multiplicity of cultural identities. Diaspora cultures may, in this way, simply signify divergence in post-cultural space as discrepancy may fluidify the polyphonic texture of cultural space. James Clifford accounts for *discrepant cosmopolitanism* (Clifford 1992: 108) – a term that entails urbanism, diasporas, and the polyphony of urban spaces, but it also sees them as interconnected, discrepant as in varied in their integrity. In their vibrancy, he also assumes a dynamism and change, which are centrifugal regarding cultural space as the term *discrepant* also suggests. While cosmopolitanisms "enact [...] differently

centered worlds” (*ibidem*: 103), i.e., they presuppose peculiar localisms with their specific cultural cores, they intersect and interconnect. Sites are traversed and culture can be seen as travel with cultural practice as “dwelling-in-traveling” (*ibidem*: 103). However, following a post-cultural scheme, the threat for the traveler is disorientation, as the cultural space loses its referentiality, and dwelling, in a Heideggerian sense, does not refer to building as in cultivating. In a cultural sense, the homogenized – even through excessive varification – cultural space results in the lack of directionality obstructing and preempting the traveler’s intentionality. Post-cultural space does not orientate and, therefore, the traveler’s existence becomes afloat. Extreme polyphony can have the same homogenizing effect as the inability to differentiate, as a result of a certain kind of flooding, is but another aspect of an “orgy of liberation” (Baudrillard 1988: 96) in which non-differentiation correlates with desertification. In this way, the false consciousness of Herbert Marcuse’s “one-dimensional man” subsumes rather a multiplicity, overwriting any binary, while exemplifying a non-referential being in a void. Christopher Clausen’s mass individualism reflects this: “unreflective, ungrounded individualism” (Clausen 2000: 145) marks the end of culture as “[t]he loss of cultural or ethnic identity disorients” (*ibidem*: 165), accounting for “momentary identities using bits and pieces from different groups as raw materials, reassembling them in unstable combinations” (*ibidem*: 122). A self-perpetuating phenomenon as in the case of the precession of simulacra, disembodiment due to the disembowelment of signification creates a process of implosion in Baudrillard’s sense, which includes the traveler’s identity as well, as, in the post-cultural mass individualism, the traveler witnesses “a paradoxical loss of conviction in one’s own subjectivity” (*ibidem*: 133).

Postmodern identity can rightly be seen as traveling in this scheme as *post* indicates “transition”. As the traveler’s traveling existence suggests, identity can be construed as hybrid in the sense it is ephemeral, and always in-between multiplicities, or “multiplicitous [...] through multiple *plication*” (Lynn 1992: 38). As opposed to signifying nomadism, or to mention another example, to pilgrimage, where transient liminality presupposes a postliminal phase as the stage of return, post-cultural traveling indicates that the traveler disappears in traveling, bereft of cultural constraints. As for the former, “The pilgrimage site, as a home, temple, or sacred settlement away from home, could ultimately be found at the center of the body in the human heart” (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 7), illuminating the embodied traveler in a synecdochic relationship to the environment. This embeddedness transforms into constant liminality in the case of the latter as the post-cultural traveler experiences sites through their image as preempted signs, as, for example, the case of the tourist pilgrims indicates it palpably. Reality threatens to become an illusion and the traveler cannot identify him / herself in its reflection. As Ian Buchanan observes, “The proliferation of sameness installs a blank, standardised, one-logo-fits-all, opacity where one expected a deeply significant enigma” (Buchanan 2005: 22). The traveler is neither a “native” cultural figure nor an

“intercultural figure” (Clifford 1992: 101) but is stuck between place and non-place in the functions of de-/ reterritorialization, opaque amidst multiplicity.

## Conclusion

In a twist of perspective, reterritorialization counteracts deterritorialization, and in that it reinstalls hope for space. Augé does not describe place and non-place as direct negations of each other: “Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten” (Augé 1995: 79). Non-places appear in our world in certain forms (e.g., airports, malls, etc.) while places of identificatory significance remain valid as non-place “never exists in pure form; places reconstitute themselves in it; relations are restored and resumed in it” (*ibidem*: 78). Even though non-places claim more and more space, the reterritorializing capacity of places remains intact.

Entwined in the complementary processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, culture is always already becoming – even it can be seen as rhizomatic in reterritorialization – and postculturality may be considered as signifying a liminal phase, a transition to a new temporal-spatial paradigm. This emerges from Baudrillard’s argument as well, since the “end of representation” and the “death of culture” (Baudrillard 1988: 97) are experienced in a “primitive society of the future” (Baudrillard and Guillaume 2008: 91), where “deterritorialization produces an originality” (*ibidem*: 92), i.e., the basis for reterritorialization, thus making way to renewal. His travel marks distance – “an unbridgeable rift” (Baudrillard 1988: 73) – due to his situatedness in a European cultural space, which reveals a subject position detached from its object in space and time. From that position what he sees as tribalism (*ibidem*: 46) demarcates his own position at the end of a temporal-spatial paradigm in contrast to another in its primitive, i.e., original and initial, stage. As in the cyclicism of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, “From the day when that eccentric modernity was born in all its glory on the other side of the Atlantic, Europe began to disappear” (*ibidem*: 95). In post-history, history starts again, and in a post-cultural space, culture is reborn, foetal (*ibidem*: 45) as it appears initially.

The apprehension is suggested by Baudrillard himself when in a later writing he insists that “We have to keep this sidereal distance and not play the little game of difference and resemblance but try to see America – or anything else – as strange. At that moment, North America appears” (Baudrillard and Guillaume 2008: 90). Reiterating Barthes, Baudrillard treats the Other here with surprise, allowing it to be legitimate in its own space. Strange or empty then mean heterogeneity and incomprehensibility (*ibidem*: 93), which presupposes referentiality to map: “If you take it as a whole, North America looks like a mutant object. If you dig into its



phenomenological details, you find that it is not. You can find many things and the voyage can become a game of discovery” (*ibidem*: 90).

Parody or not, Baudrillard’s travel across America indicates post-cultural nomadism trapping the traveler in traveling. The new tribalism he observes, engulfing him as traveler despite his distant gaze, may signify a new cycle of temporal-spatial paradigm, which is capable of reinstating place, until deterritorialized, to express a sense of place – a basic characteristic of human life.

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