

# AMERICA

Jean Baudrillard

Translated by Chris Turner  
(Material Word)



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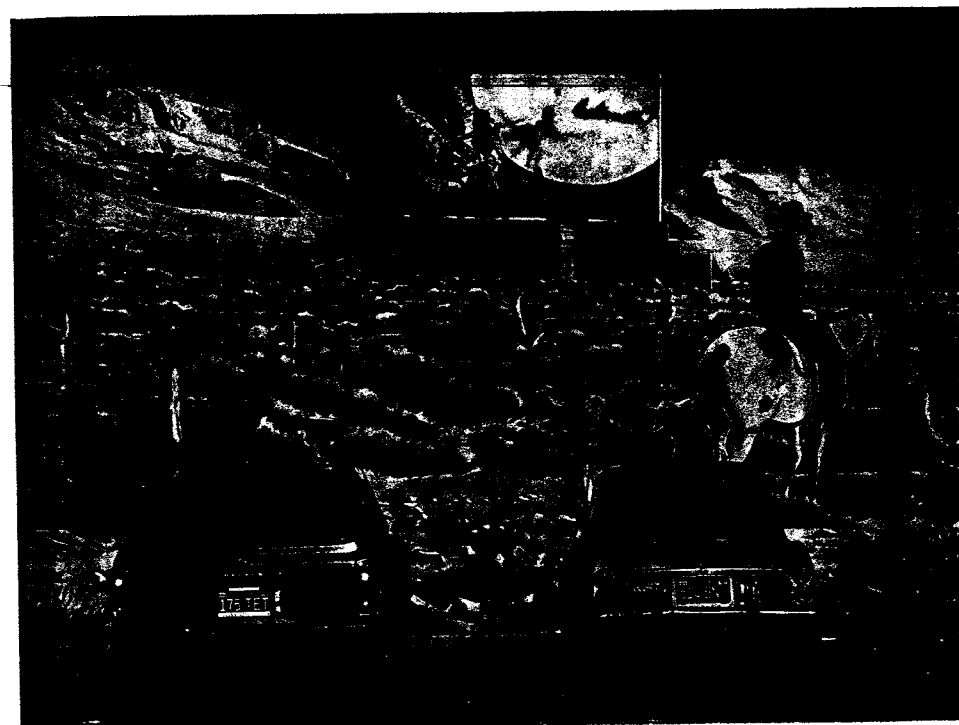
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## ASTRAL AMERICA

Astral America. The lyrical nature of pure circulation. As against the melancholy of European analyses. The direct star-blast from vectors and signals, from the vertical and the spatial. As against the fevered distance of the cultural gaze.

Joy in the collapse of metaphor, which here in Europe we merely grieve over. The exhilaration of obscenity, the obscenity of obviousness, the obviousness of power, the power of simulation. As against our disappointed virginity, our chasms of affectation.

Sideration. Star-blasted, horizontally by the car, altitudinally by the plane, electronically by television, geologically by deserts, stereolithically by the megalopoloi, transpolitically by the power game, the power museum that America has become for the whole world.

For me there is no truth of America. I ask of the Americans only that they be Americans. I do not ask them to be intelligent, sensible, original. I ask them

only to populate a space incommensurate with my own, to be for me the highest astral point, the finest orbital space. Why should I go and decentralize myself in France, in the ethnic and the local, which are merely the shreds and vestiges of centrality? I want to excentre myself, to become eccentric, but I want to do so in a place that is the centre of the world. And, in this sense, the latest fast-food outlet, the most banal suburb, the blandest of giant American cars or the most insignificant cartoon-strip majorette is more at the centre of the world than any of the cultural manifestations of old Europe. This is the only country which gives you the opportunity to be so brutally naive: things, faces, skies, and deserts are expected to be simply what they are. This is the land of the 'just as it is'.

America always gives me a feeling of real asceticism. Culture, politics – and sexuality too – are seen exclusively in terms of the desert, which here assumes the status of a primal scene. Everything disappears before that desert vision. Even the body, by an ensuing effect of undernourishment, takes on a transparent form, a lightness near to complete disappearance. Everything around me suffers this same desertification. But this radical experimentation is the only thing that enables me to get through and produces that astral quality I have not found anywhere else.

America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved. Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too. It may be that the truth of America can only be seen by a European, since he alone will discover here the perfect simulacrum – that of the immanence and material transcription of all values. The Americans, for their part, have no sense of simulation. They are themselves

simulation in its most developed state, but they have no language in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model. As a result, they 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. The same mythical and analytic excitement that made us look towards those earlier societies today impels us to look in the direction of America. With the same passion and the same prejudices.

In reality, you do not, as I had hoped, get any distance on Europe from here. You do not acquire a fresh angle on it. When you turn-around, it has quite simply disappeared. The point is that there is really no need to adopt a critical stance on Europe from here. That is something you can do in Europe. And what is there to criticize which has not been criticized a thousand times before? What you have to do is enter the fiction of America, enter America as fiction. It is, indeed, on this fictive basis that it dominates the world. Even if every detail of America were insignificant, America is something that is beyond us all. . .

America is a giant hologram, in the sense that information concerning the whole is contained in each of its elements. Take the tiniest little place in the desert, any old street in a Mid-West town, a parking lot, a Californian house, a BurgerKing or a Studebaker, and you have the whole of the US – South, North, East, or West. Holographic also in that it has the coherent light of the laser, the homogeneity of the single elements scanned by the same beams. From the visual and plastic viewpoints too: things seem to be made of a more unreal substance; they seem to turn and move in a void as if by a special lighting effect, a fine membrane you pass through without noticing

it. This is obviously true of the desert. It is also the case with Las Vegas and advertising, and even the activities of the people, public relations, and everyday electronics all stand out with the plasticity and simplicity of a beam of light. The hologram is akin to the world of phantasy. It is a three-dimensional dream and you can enter it as you would a dream. Everything depends on the existence of the ray of light bearing the objects. If it is interrupted, all the effects are dispersed, and reality along with it. You do indeed get the impression that America is made up of a fantastic switching between similar elements, and that everything is only held together by a thread of light, a laser beam, scanning out American reality before our eyes. In America the spectral does not refer to phantoms or to dancing ghosts, but to the spectrum into which light disperses.

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.

All dwellings have something of the grave about them, but here the fake serenity is complete. The unspeakable house plants, lurking everywhere like the obsessive fear of death, the picture windows looking like Snow White's glass coffin, the clumps of pale, dwarf flowers stretched out in patches like sclerosis, the proliferation of technical gadgetry inside the house, beneath it, around it, like drips in an intensive care ward, the TV, stereo, and video which provide communication with the beyond, the car (or cars) that connect one up to that great shoppers' funeral parlour, the super-

market, and, lastly, the wife and children, as glowing symptoms of success ... everything here testifies to death having found its ideal home.

The microwave, the waste disposal, the orgasmic elasticity of the carpets: this soft, resort-style civilization irresistibly evokes the end of the world. All their activities here have a surreptitious end-of-the-world feel to them: these Californian scholars with monomaniacal passions for things French or Marxist, the various sects obsessively concerned with chastity or crime, these joggers sleepwalking in the mist like shadows that have escaped from Plato's cave, the very real mental defectives or mongols let out of the psychiatric hospitals (this letting loose of the mad into the city seems a sure sign of the end of the world, the loosing of the seals of the Apocalypse), these obese individuals who have escaped from the hormone laboratories of their own bodies, and these drilling platforms – 'oil sanctuaries' – keeping watch in the night, like grand casinos, or extraterrestrial spacecraft.

Ravishing hyperrealism  
Ecstatic asceticism  
Multi-process tracking shot  
Interactive multi-dimensionality  
Mind-blowing

*Western Digitals*  
*Body Building Incorporated*  
*Mileage unlimited*  
*Channel Zero*

Seedy bar in Santa Barbara. The billiard player's red braces. Foucault, Sartre, and Orson Welles all standing together at the counter, talking to each other, strangely convincing, strikingly like the originals. 'Cocktail scenery.' The smell of violence, the stale odour of beer. 'Hustling is prohibited.'

Sex, beach, and mountains. Sex and beach, beach and mountains. Mountains and sex. A few concepts. Sex and concepts. 'Just a life.'

Everything is destined to reappear as simulation. Landscapes as photography, women as the sexual scenario, thoughts as writing, terrorism as fashion and the media, events as television. Things seem only to exist by virtue of this strange destiny. You wonder whether the world itself isn't just here to serve as advertising copy in some other world.

When the only physical beauty is created by plastic surgery, the only urban beauty by landscape surgery, the only opinion by opinion poll surgery. . . and now, with genetic engineering, along comes plastic surgery for the whole human species.

This is a culture which sets up specialized institutes so that people's bodies can come together and touch, and, at the same time, invents pans in which the water *does not touch* the bottom of the pan, which is made of a substance so homogeneous, dry, and artificial that not a single drop sticks to it, just like those bodies intertwined in 'feeling' and therapeutic love, which do not touch – not even for a moment. This is called interface or interaction. It has replaced face-to-face contact and action. It is also called communication, because these things really do communicate: the miracle is that the pan bottom communicates its heat to the water without touching it, in a sort of remote boiling process, in the same way as one body communicates its fluid, its erotic potential, to another without that other ever being seduced or even

disturbed, by a sort of molecular capillary action. The code of separation has worked so well that they have even managed to separate the water from the pan and to make the pan transmit its heat *as a message*, or to make one body transmit its desire to the other as a message, as a fluid to be decoded. This is called information and it has wormed its way into everything, like a phobic, maniacal leitmotiv, which affects sexual relations as well as kitchen implements.

Other examples of this mania for asepsis:

The Getty museum where old paintings look new, bleached and gleaming, cleansed of all patina and *craquelure*, with an artificial lustre that echoes the fake Pompeian décor all around them.

In Philadelphia, a radical sect named 'MOVE', with a bizarre set of rules, including one forbidding both the practice of autopsy and the removal of rubbish, is cleared out by the police, who kill eleven people by fire and burn down thirty adjacent houses, including those (the irony of it!) of all the neighbours who had called for the sect to be removed.

This, too, is a clean-up operation. They are getting rid of rubbish and patina, getting back to an original state of cleanliness, restoring. 'Keep America clean.' And that smile everyone gives you as they pass, that friendly contraction of the jaws triggered by human warmth. It is the eternal smile of communication, the smile through which the child becomes aware of the presence of others, or struggles desperately with the problem of their presence. It is the equivalent of the primal scream of man alone in the world. Whether I am right in all this or not, they certainly do smile at you here, though neither from courtesy, nor from an effort to charm. This smile signifies only the need to smile. It is a bit like the Cheshire Cat's grin: it continues to float on faces long after all emotion has disappeared. A smile available at any moment, but half-scared to exist, to give itself away. No

ulterior motive lurks behind it, but it keeps you at a distance. It is part of the general cryogenization of emotions. It is, indeed, the smile the dead man will wear in his funeral home, as he clings to a hope of maintaining contact even in the next world. The smile of immunity, the smile of advertising: 'This country is good. I am good. We are the best'. It is also Reagan's smile – the culmination of the self-satisfaction of the entire American nation – which is on the way to becoming the sole principle of government. An autoprophetic smile, like all signs in advertising. Smile and others will smile back. Smile to show how transparent, how candid you are. Smile if you have nothing to say. Most of all, do not hide the fact you have nothing to say nor your total indifference to others. Let this emptiness, this profound indifference shine out spontaneously in your smile. Give your emptiness and indifference to others, light up your face with the zero degree of joy and pleasure, smile, smile, smile. . . Americans may have no identity, but they do have wonderful teeth.

And it works. With this smile Reagan obtains a much wider consensus than any that could be achieved by a Kennedy with mere reason or political intelligence. The recourse to a pure form of compliment, be it animal or infantile, is much more successful and the whole American population comes together in this toothpaste effect. No idea – not even the nation's moral values in their entirety – could ever have produced such a result. Reagan's credibility is exactly equal to his transparency and the nullity of his smile.

The skateboarder with his walkman, the intellectual working on his word-processor, the Bronx breakdancer whirling frantically in the Roxy, the jogger and the body-builder: everywhere, whether in regard to the body or the mental faculties, you find the same blank solitude, the same narcissistic refraction.

This omnipresent cult of the body is extraordinary. It is the only object on which everyone is made to concentrate, not as a source of pleasure, but as an object of frantic concern, in the obsessive fear of failure or substandard performance, a sign and an anticipation of death, that death to which no one can any longer give a meaning, but which everyone knows has at all times to be prevented. The body is cherished in the perverse certainty of its uselessness, in the total certainty of its non-resurrection. Now, pleasure is an effect of the resurrection of the body, by which it exceeds that hormonal, vascular and dietetic equilibrium in which we seek to imprison it, that exorcism by fitness and hygiene. So the body has to be made to forget pleasure as present grace, to forget its possible metamorphosis into other forms of appearance and become dedicated to the utopian preservation of a youth that is, in any case, already lost. For the body which doubts its own existence is already half-dead, and the current semi-yogic, semi-ecstatic cult of the body is a morbid preoccupation. The care taken of the body while it is alive prefigures the way it will be made up in the funeral home, where it will be given a smile that is really 'into' death.

This 'into' is the key to everything. The point is not to be nor even to have a body, but to be into your own body. Into your sexuality, into your own desire. Into your own functions, as if they were energy differentials or video screens. The hedonism of the 'into': the body is a scenario and the curious hygienist threnody devoted to it runs through the innumerable fitness centres, body-building gyms, stimulation and simulation studios that stretch from Venice to Tupanga Canyon, bearing witness to a collective asexual obsession.

This is echoed by the other obsession: that of being 'into', hooked in to your own brain. What people are contemplating on their word-processor screens is the operation of their own brains. It is not entrails that we try to interpret these days, nor even hearts or facial expressions; it is, quite simply, the brain. We want to expose to view its billions of connections and watch it

operating like a video-game. All this cerebral, electronic snobbery is hugely affected – far from being the sign of a superior knowledge of humanity, it is merely the mark of a simplified theory, since the human being is here reduced to the terminal excrescence of his or her spinal chord. But we should not worry too much about this: it is all much less scientific, less functional than is ordinarily thought. All that fascinates us is the *spectacle* of the brain and its workings. What we are wanting here is to see our thoughts unfolding before us – and this itself is a superstition.

Hence, the academic grappling with his computer, ceaselessly correcting, reworking, and complexifying, turning the exercise into a kind of interminable psychoanalysis, memorizing everything in an effort to escape the final outcome, to delay the day of reckoning of death, and that other – fatal – moment of reckoning that is writing, by forming an endless feed-back loop with the machine. This is a marvellous instrument of exoteric magic. In fact all these interactions come down in the end to endless exchanges with a machine. Just look at the child sitting in front of his computer at school; do you think he has been made interactive, opened up to the world? Child and machine have merely been joined together in an integrated circuit. As for the intellectual, he has at last found the equivalent of what the teenager gets from his stereo and his walkman: a spectacular desublimation of thought, his concepts as images on a screen.

In the Roxy, the sound-proofed bar dominates the dancefloor the way the screens dominate an air traffic control room or the technicians' gallery towers over a television studio. The club is a fluorescent milieu with spotlighting, strobe effects, dancers swept by beams of light . . . all of these the effects you find on screens. *And everyone is aware of this.* Today, no

staging of bodies, no performance can be without its control screen. This is not there to see or reflect those taking part, with the distance and magic of the mirror. No, it is there as an instantaneous, depthless refraction. Video, *everywhere, serves only this end: it is a screen of ecstatic refraction.* As such, it has nothing of the traditional image or scene, or of traditional theatricality, and its purpose is not to present action or allow self-contemplation; its goal is *to be hooked up to itself.* Without this circular hook-up, without this brief, instantaneous network that a brain, an object, an event; or a discourse create by being hooked up to themselves, without this perpetual video, nothing has any meaning today. The mirror phase has given way to the video phase.

This is not narcissism and it is wrong to abuse that term to describe the effect. What develops around the video or stereo culture is not a narcissistic imaginary, but an effect of frantic self-referentiality, a short-circuit which immediately hooks up like with like, and, in so doing, emphasizes their surface intensity and deeper meaninglessness.

This is the special effect of our times. The *ecstasy of the polaroid* is of the same order: to hold the object and its image almost simultaneously as if the conception of light of ancient physics or metaphysics, in which each object was thought to secrete doubles or negatives of itself that we pick up with our eyes, has become a reality. It is a dream. It is the optical materialization of a magical process. The polaroid photo is a sort of ecstatic membrane that has come away from the real object.

You stop a horse that is bolting. You do not stop a jogger who is jogging. Foaming at the mouth, his mind riveted on the inner countdown to the moment when he will achieve a higher plane of consciousness, he is not to be stopped. If you stopped him to ask the time, he would bite your head off. He doesn't have a bit between his teeth, though he may perhaps be carrying

dumb-bells or even weights in his belt (where are the days when girls used to wear bracelets on their ankles?). What the third-century Stylite sought in self-privation and proud stillness, he is seeking through the muscular exhaustion of his body. He is the brother in mortification of those who conscientiously exhaust themselves in the body-building studios on complicated machines with chrome pulleys and on terrifying medical contraptions. There is a direct line that runs from the medieval instruments of torture, via the industrial movements of production-line work, to the techniques of schooling the body by using mechanical apparatuses. Like dieting, body-building, and so many other things, jogging is a new form of voluntary servitude (it is also a new form of adultery).

Decidedly, joggers are the true Latter Day Saints and the protagonists of an easy-does-it Apocalypse. Nothing evokes the end of the world more than a man running straight ahead on a beach, swathed in the sounds of his walkman, cocooned in the solitary sacrifice of his energy, indifferent even to catastrophes since he expects destruction to come only as the fruit of his own efforts, from exhausting the energy of a body that has in his own eyes become useless. Primitives, when in despair, would commit suicide by swimming out to sea until they could swim no longer. The jogger commits suicide by running up and down the beach. His eyes are wild, saliva drips from his mouth. Do not stop him. He will either hit you or simply carry on dancing around in front of you like a man possessed.

The only comparable distress is that of a man eating alone in the heart of the city. You see people doing that in New York, the human flotsam of conviviality, no longer even concealing themselves to eat leftovers in public. But this still belongs to the world of urban, industrial poverty. The thousands of lone men, each running on their own account, with no thought for others, with a stereophonic fluid in their heads that oozes through into

their eyes, that is the world of *Blade Runner*, the post-catastrophe world. Not to be aware of the natural light of California, nor even of a mountain fire that has been driven ten miles out to sea by the hot wind, and is enveloping the offshore oil platforms in its smoke, to see nothing of all this and obstinately to carry on running by a sort of lymphatic flagellation till sacrificial exhaustion is reached, that is truly a sign from the beyond. It is like the obese person who keeps on getting fatter, the record rotating endlessly in the same groove, the cells of a tumour proliferating, like everything that has lost the formula for stopping itself. This entire society, including its active, productive part – everyone – is running straight ahead, because they have lost the formula for stopping.

All these track-suits and jogging suits, these loose-fitting shorts and baggy cotton shirts, these 'easy clothes' are actually old bits of nightwear, and all these relaxed walkers and runners have not yet left the night behind. As a result of wearing these billowing clothes, their bodies have come to float in their clothes and they themselves float in their own bodies.

Anorexic culture: a culture of disgust, of expulsion, of anthropoemia, of rejection. Characteristic of a period of obesity, saturation, overabundance.

The anorexic prefigures this culture in rather a poetic fashion by trying to keep it at bay. He refuses lack. He says: I lack nothing, therefore I shall not eat. With the overweight person, it is the opposite: he refuses fullness, repletion. He says: I lack everything, so I will eat anything at all. The anorexic staves off lack by emptiness, the overweight person staves off fullness by excess. Both are homeopathic final solutions, solutions by extermination.

The jogger has yet another solution. In a sense, he spews himself out; he doesn't merely expend his energy in his running, he vomits it. He has to attain the ecstasy of fatigue, the 'high' of mechanical annihilation, just as the anorexic aims for the 'high' of organic annihilation, the ecstasy of the empty

body and the obese individual seeks the high of dimensional annihilation: the ecstasy of the full body.

The latest obsession of American public opinion: the sexual abuse of children. There is now a law that two people must be present when very young children are being handled for fear of unverifiable sexual abuse. At the same time, supermarket carrier bags are adorned with the portraits of missing children.

Protect everything, detect everything, contain everything – obsessional society.

Save time. Save energy. Save money. Save our souls – phobic society.

Low tar. Low energy. Low calories. Low sex. Low speed – anorexic society.

Curiously, in this world where everything is available in profusion, everything has to be saved and economized. The obsession of a young society, concerned to protect its future? The impression given is rather that of a sense of threat, all the more insidious for being groundless. It is profusion which creates an hallucination of a sort of backfiring into shortage and penury, which has to be averted by homeopathic discipline. There are no other reasons for these starvation rations – collective dieting, ecological control, this mortification of bodies and pleasures. A whole society organized to ward off the vengeance of overfed divinities, suffocated by plenty. Of course our basic problem today is how to avoid becoming overweight.

Compiling inventories of everything, stocking everything, memorizing everything.

Hence the elephants enveloped in liquid bitumen, whose bones become

fossilized in its black, mineral viscosity, together with the lions, mammoths, and wolves who roamed the plains of Los Angeles and were the first, prehistoric victims of the oil fields. Today they have all received a second embalming at Hancock Park in a museum devoted to the rote-learning of prehistory. And, in conformity with the prevailing moral code, all this is presented with conviction. Americans are people of conviction, convinced of everything and seeking to convince. One of the aspects of their good faith is this stubborn determination to reconstitute everything of a past and a history which were not their own and which they have largely destroyed or spirited away. Renaissance castles, fossilized elephants, Indians on reservations, sequoias as holograms, etc.

In storing details on their computers of all the known souls in the civilized (white) countries, the Mormons of Salt Lake City are behaving no differently from other Americans, who all share the same missionary spirit. It is never too late to revive your origins. It is their destiny: since they were not the first to be in on history, they will be the first to immortalize everything by reconstitution (by putting things in museums, they can match in an instant the fossilization process nature took millions of years to complete). But the conception Americans have of the museum is much wider than our own. To them, everything is worthy of protection, embalming, restoration. Everything can have a second birth, the eternal birth of the simulacrum. Not only are the Americans missionaries, they are also Anabaptists: having missed out on the original baptism, they dream of baptizing everything a second time and only accord value to this later sacrament which is, as we know, a repeat performance of the first, but its repetition as *something more real*. And this indeed is the perfect definition of the simulacrum. All Anabaptists are sectarian, and sometimes violent. Americans are no exception to this rule. To reconstruct things in their exact form, so as to present them on the Day of Judgement, they are prepared to destroy and exterminate – Thomas Münzer was an Anabaptist.

It is not by chance that it is the Mormons who run the world's biggest computerization project: the recording of twenty generations of living souls throughout the world, a process which is seen as a rebaptizing of those souls, bringing them a new promise of salvation. Evangelization has become a mission of mutants, of extraterrestrials, and if it has progressed (?) in that direction, it is thanks to the latest memory-storage techniques. And these have been made possible by the deep puritanism of computer science, an intensely Calvinistic, Presbyterian discipline, which has inherited the universal and scientific rigidity of the techniques for achieving salvation by good works. The Counter-Reformation methods of the Catholic Church, with its naive sacramental practices, its cults, its more archaic and popular beliefs, could never compete with this modernity.

*Executive Terminal  
Basic Extermination  
Metastatic Consumption*

Everywhere survival has become a burning issue, perhaps by some obscure weariness of life or a collective desire for catastrophe (though we should not take all this too seriously: it is also a playing at catastrophe). Certainly, this whole panoply of survival issues – dieting, ecology, saving the sequoias, seals or the human race – tends to prove that we are very much alive (just as all imaginary fairy-tales tend to prove that the real world is very real). But this is not so certain, for not only is the fact of living not really well-attested, but the paradox of this society is that you cannot even die in it any more since you are already dead. . . . This is real suspense. And it is not simply an effect of living in the nuclear age, but derives from the ease with which we now live, which makes survivors of us all. If the bomb drops, we shall neither have the time to die nor any awareness of dying. But already in our

hyper-protected society we no longer have any awareness of death, since we have subtly passed over into a state where life is excessively easy.

The holocaust created an anticipatory form of such a condition. What the inmates of the concentration camps were deprived of was the very possibility of having control of their own deaths, of playing, even gambling with their own deaths, making their deaths a sacrifice: they were robbed of power over their own deaths. And this is what is happening to all of us, in slow, homeopathic doses, by virtue of the very development of our systems. The explosions and the extermination (Auschwitz and Hiroshima) still go on, though they have simply taken on a purulent, endemic form. The chain reaction continues nonetheless, the contagion, the unfolding of the viral and bacteriological process. The end of history was precisely the inauguration of this chain reaction.

The obsessive desire for survival (and not for *life*) is a symptom of this state of affairs and doubtless also the most worrying sign of the degradation of the species. If you think about the forms that desire currently takes – antinuclear shelters, cryogenization, high-pressure therapy – you see that they are exactly the forms of extermination. To avoid dying, one chooses to withdraw into some protective bubble or other. In this light, we should take it as a reassuring sign that people lost interest in antinuclear protection so quickly (the shelter market has become a mere prestige market, like the market for artworks or luxury yachts). It seems that people have become tired of nuclear blackmail and decided not to give in to it, leaving the threat of destruction hanging in mid-air over them, perhaps with an obscure sense of how unreal it is. A fine example of a vital reaction disguised as resignation. 'If we have to die, better to die in the open air than in an underground sarcophagus.' At a stroke an end is put to survival blackmail and life can go on.

Everyone is weary of these apocalyptic visions – the great scenario of the nuclear threat, the theatrical negotiations, 'Star Wars'. In the end, they

defend themselves with a lack of imagination. Even attempts to stimulate that imagination in films like *The Last Day* have not worked. Nothing has ever been able to make this nuclear scene – or obscenity – credible. With delicate matters like this (as with cancer), imagining death has the effect of bringing the fatal event closer. The masses' silent indifference to nuclear pathos (whether it comes from the nuclear powers or from antinuclear campaigners) is therefore a great sign of hope and a political fact of the utmost importance.

There is a science-fiction story in which a number of very rich people wake up one morning in their luxury villas in the mountains to find that they are encircled by a transparent and insuperable obstacle, a wall of glass that has appeared in the night. From the depths of their vitrified luxury, they can still just discern the outside world, the real universe from which they are cut off, which has suddenly become the ideal world. But it is too late. These rich people will die slowly in their aquarium like goldfish. Some of the university campuses here remind me of this.

Lost among the pine trees, the fields, and the rivers (it is an old ranch that was donated to the university), and made up of little blocks, each one out of sight of the others, like the people who live in them: this one is Santa Cruz. It's a bit like the Bermuda Triangle (or Santa Barbara). Everything vanishes. Everything gets sucked in. Total decentring, total community. After the ideal city of the future, the ideal cosy nook. Nothing converges on a single point, neither the traffic, nor the architecture, nor authority. But, by that very token, it also becomes impossible to hold a demonstration: where could you assemble? Demonstrations can only go round and round in the forest, where the participants alone can see them. Of all the Californian campuses, famous for their spaciousness and charm, this is the most idealized, the most naturalized. It is the epitome of all that is beautiful.

Famous architects designed the buildings and the bays of Carmel and Monterey stretch out all around. If the conviviality of the future already exists somewhere, then this must be the place. And yet this freedom, protected both by the pleasantness of the vegetation and by academic openness, becomes its own prisoner once again, immured in a natural and social overprotectedness which ends up producing all the agonies of the carceral universe (precisely by virtue of its walls, the carceral system may in certain conditions evolve in the direction of utopia more rapidly than open social systems). Society has become emancipated here as nowhere else on earth. The psychiatric hospitals have been opened up, public transport is free, and yet paradoxically this ideal has become closed in on itself as if behind a wall of glass.

A paradisiac and inward-looking illusion. We might understand what Lyotard calls the 'Pacific Wall' as the wall of crystal that imprisons California in its own beatitude. But whereas the demand for happiness used to be something oceanic and emancipatory, here it comes wrapped up in a foetal tranquillity. Are there still passions, murders, and acts of violence in this strange, padded, wooded, pacified, convivial republic? Yes, but the violence is autistic and reactional. There are no crimes of passion, but there are rapes, and a case where a dozen women were murdered in two years before the killer was discovered. This is foetal violence, as gratuitous as 'automatic writing'. It seems an expression not so much of real aggression as of nostalgia for the old prohibitions (why does the number of rapes increase with the degree of sexual liberation?).

How sentimental these mixed dormitories seem, opening out here on to the forest, as if nature itself could be convivial and maternal, could herself stand as guarantor for the blossoming of sexuality and the ecology of manners, as if nature could look sympathetically upon any human society, as if one could have some relationship with her, outside the cruel universe of magic, which was not *stoical*, not the Stoics' relation between a blind,

pitiless necessity and the even greater defiance, the even greater freedom one has to counterpose to it. Here, every last vestige of a heroic sense of destiny has disappeared. The whole place exudes an air of sentimental reconciliation with nature, with sex, with madness and even with history (by way of a carefully corrected, revised Marxism).

Like many other aspects of contemporary America, Santa Cruz is part of the post-orgy world, the world left behind after the great social and sexual convulsions. The refugees from the orgy – the orgy of sex, political violence, the Vietnam War, the Woodstock Crusade, and the ethnic and anti-capitalist struggles too, together with the passion for money, the passion for success, hard technologies etc., in short, the whole orgy of modernity – are all there, jogging along in their tribalism, which is akin to the electronic tribalism of Silicon Valley. Reduced pace of work, decentralization, air-conditioning, soft technologies. Paradise. But a very slight modification, a change of just a few degrees, would suffice to make it seem like hell.

A new development in the field of sexuality. The orgy is over, liberation is over; it is not sex one is looking for but one's 'gender', i.e. both one's 'look' and its genetic formula. People no longer oscillate between desire and its fulfilment, but between their genetic formula and their sexual identity (to be discovered). This is a new erotic culture. After a culture based on prohibition ('What are your prerequisites for sex?' — 'The door has to be locked, the lights have to be out, and my mother has to be in another State'), this is a culture based on the questioning of one's own definition: 'Am I sexed? What sex am I? Ultimately, is sex necessary? What does sexual difference consist in?' Liberation has left everyone in an undefined state (it is always the same: once you are liberated, you are forced to ask who you are). After a triumphalist phase, the assertion of female sexuality has become as fragile as that of male sexuality. No one knows where they are. This is why there's so

much love-making, so many children produced: there at least you still have proof that two people are needed *so difference still exists*. But not for long. Already, the 'muscle-woman', who, simply by using her vaginal muscles, manages to reproduce the effect of male penetration exactly, is a good example of self-referentiality and of getting along without difference – she at least has found her label.

The more general problem is one of an absence of difference, bound up with a decline in the display of sexual characteristics. The outer signs of masculinity are tending towards zero, but so are the signs of femininity. It is in this conjuncture that we have seen new idols emerging, idols who take up the challenge of undefinedness and who play at mixing genres/genders. 'Gender benders'. Neither masculine nor feminine, but not homosexual either. Boy George, Michael Jackson, David Bowie. . . Whereas the idols of the previous generation were explosive figures of sex and pleasure, these new idols pose for everyone the question of the *play* of difference and their own lack of definition. They are exceptional figures. For want of an identity, most of them have gone in search of a 'gender model', a generic formula. Some kind of differentiating feature has to be found, so why not look for it in fashion . . . or in genetics? A 'look' based on clothes, or a 'look' based on cells. Any old gimmick will do, any idiom. The question of difference is more crucial than that of pleasure. Are we seeing here a post-modern version of a sexual liberation that is now past and gone, that liberation as mere fashion, or is this a bio-sociological mutation in our own self-perception, based upon the sexual losing the priority it formerly enjoyed, a priority which characterized the whole modern period? 'Gender Research: a New Frontier?'

Pushed to its logical conclusions, this would leave neither masculine nor feminine, but a dissemination of individual sexes referring only to themselves, each one managed as an independent enterprise. The end of seduction, the end of difference, and a slide towards a different system of

values. An astonishing paradox emerges: sexuality might become once again a merely secondary problem, as it was in most earlier societies, and be eclipsed by other stronger symbols: systems (birth, hierarchy, asceticism, glory, death). This would prove that sexuality was after all only one possible model among many, and not the most crucial. But what might those new models be today (for in the meantime all the others have disappeared)? The model that seems likely to emerge is that of an ideal of performance, of the genetic fulfilment of one's own formula. In business, in emotional life, in their projects and their pleasures, everyone will seek to develop their optimum programme. Everyone will have their code, their formula. But also their 'look', their image. So shall we perhaps get something like a genetic 'look'?

Irvine: a new Silicon Valley. Electronic factories with no openings to the outside world, like integrated circuits. A desert zone, given over to ions and electrons, a supra-human place, the product of inhuman decision-making. By a terrible twist of irony it just had to be here, in the hills of Irvine, that they shot *Planet of the Apes*. But, on the lawn, the American squirrels tell us all is well, and that America is kind to animals, to itself, and to the rest of the world, and that in everyone's heart there is a slumbering squirrel. The whole Walt Disney philosophy eats out of your hand with these pretty little sentimental creatures in grey fur coats. For my own part, I believe that behind these smiling eyes there lurks a cold, ferocious beast fearfully stalking us. . . On the same lawn with the squirrels stands a sign put there by some society or other of Jesus: 'Vietnam, Cambodia, Lebanon, Grenada - We are a violent society in a violent world!'

There is nothing funny about Halloween. This sarcastic festival reflects, rather, an infernal demand for revenge by children on the adult world. The

threat from this evil force hangs over adults here, equal in intensity only to their devotion to children. There is nothing more unhealthy than this childish sorcery, behind all the dressing up and the presents - people turn out their lights and hide, for fear of harassment. And it is no accident that some of them stick needles or razor blades into the apples or cookies they hand out to the children.

Laughter on American television has taken the place of the chorus in Greek tragedy. It is unrelenting; the news, the stock-exchange reports, and the weather forecast are about the only things spared. But so obsessive is it that you go on hearing it behind the voice of Reagan or the Marines disaster in Beirut. Even behind the adverts. It is the monster from *Alien* prowling around in all the corridors of the spaceship. It is the sarcastic exhilaration of a puritan culture. In other countries, the business of laughing is left to the viewers. Here, their laughter is put on the screen, integrated into the show. It is the screen that is laughing and having a good time. You are simply left alone with your consternation.

Vietnam on television (a pleonasm, since it always was a television war). The Americans fight with two essential weapons: air power and information. That is, with the physical bombardment of the enemy and the electronic bombardment of the rest of the world. These are non-territorial weapons, whilst all the Vietnamese weapons and all their tactics were products of the people and its territory.

That is why the war was won by both sides: by the Vietnamese on the ground, by the Americans in the electronic mental space. And if the one side won an ideological and political victory, the other made *Apocalypse Now* and that has gone right around the world.

The obsessive fear of the Americans is that the lights might go out. Lights are left on all night in the houses. In the tower blocks the empty offices remain lit. On the freeways, in broad daylight, the cars keep all their headlights on. In Palms Ave., Venice, California, a little grocery store that sells beer in a part of town where no one is on the streets after 7 p.m. leaves its orange and green neon sign flashing all night, into the void. And this is not to mention the television, with its twenty-four-hour schedules, often to be seen functioning like an hallucination in the empty rooms of houses or vacant hotel rooms – as in the Porterville hotel where the curtains were torn, the water cut off, and the doors swinging in the wind, but on the fluorescent screen in each of the rooms a TV commentator was describing the take-off of the space shuttle. There is nothing more mysterious than a TV set left on in an empty room. It is even stranger than a man talking to himself or a woman standing dreaming at her stove. It is as if another planet is communicating with you. Suddenly the TV reveals itself for what it really is: a video of another world, ultimately addressed to no one at all, delivering its images indifferently, indifferent to its own messages (you can easily imagine it still functioning after humanity has disappeared). In short, in America the arrival of night-time or periods of rest cannot be accepted, nor can the Americans bear to see the technological process halted. Everything has to be working all the time, there has to be no let-up in man's artificial power, and the intermittent character of natural cycles (the seasons, day and night, heat and cold) has to be replaced by a functional continuum that is sometimes absurd (deep down, there is the same refusal of the intermittent nature of true and false: everything is true; and of good and evil: everything is good). You may seek to explain this in terms of fear, perhaps obsessional fear, or say that this unproductive expenditure is an act of mourning. But what is absurd is also admirable. The skylines lit up at dead of night, the air-conditioning systems cooling empty hotels in the desert and artificial light in the middle of the day all have something both demented and admirable about them. The mindless

luxury of a rich civilization, and yet of a civilization perhaps as scared to see the lights go out as was the hunter in his primitive night. There is some truth in all of this. But what is striking is the fascination with artifice, with energy and space. And not only natural space: space is spacious in their heads as well.

All great world powers have at some time or another created their monumental avenues which provided, as one looked down them, a miniature representation of the infinitude of empire. But the Aztecs at Teotihuacan, the Egyptians in the Valley of Kings, and Louis XIV at Versailles all created these syntheses in an architecture that was their own. Here in Washington, the vast panorama that stretches from the Lincoln Memorial to the Capitol is made up of a series of museums encapsulating our entire universe from Stone Age to Space Age. This gives the whole thing a science-fiction feel, as if an attempt had been made to gather all the marks of earthly endeavour and culture together here for the benefit of a visitor from outer space. And the White House, standing just alongside, watching discreetly over the whole, itself comes to look like a museum, the museum of world power, with an air of remoteness and prophylactic whiteness.

There is nothing to match flying over Los Angeles by night. A sort of luminous, geometric, incandescent immensity, stretching as far as the eye can see, bursting out from the cracks in the clouds. Only Hieronymus Bosch's hell can match this inferno effect. The muted fluorescence of all the diagonals: Willshire, Lincoln, Sunset, Santa Monica. Already, flying over San Fernando Valley, you come upon the horizontal infinite in every direction. But, once you are beyond the mountain, a city ten times larger hits you. You will never have encountered anything that stretches as far as this

before. Even the sea cannot match it, since it is not divided up geometrically. The irregular, scattered flickering of European cities does not produce the same parallel lines, the same vanishing points, the same aerial perspectives either. They are medieval cities. This one condenses by night the entire future geometry of the networks of human relations, gleaming in their abstraction, luminous in their extension, astral in their reproduction to infinity. Mulholland Drive by night is an extraterrestrial's vantage-point on earth, or conversely, an earth-dweller's vantage-point on the Galactic metropolis.

Dawn in Los Angeles, coming up over the Hollywood hills. You get the distinct feeling that the sun only touched Europe lightly on its way to rising properly here, above this plane geometry where its light is still that brand new light of the edge of the desert. Long-stemmed palm trees, swaying in front of the electronic billboard, the only vertical signs in this two-dimensional world.

At 6 a.m. a man is already telephoning from a public phonebox in Beverly Terrace. The neon signs of the night are going out as the daytime ones become visible. The light everywhere reveals and illuminates the absence of architecture. This is what gives the city its beauty, this city that is so intimate and warm, whatever anyone says of it: the fact is it is in love with its limitless horizontality, as New York may be with its verticality.

#### LOS ANGELES FREEWAYS

Gigantic, spontaneous spectacle of automotive traffic. A total collective act, staged by the entire population, twenty-four hours a day. By virtue of the sheer size of the layout and the kind of complicity that binds this network of

thoroughfares together, traffic rises here to the level of a dramatic attraction, acquires the status of symbolic organization. The machines themselves, with their fluidity and their automatic transmission, have created a milieu in their own image, a milieu into which you insert yourself gently, which you switch over to as you might switch over to a TV channel. Unlike our European motorways, which are unique, directional axes, and are therefore still places of expulsion (Virilio), the freeway system is a place of integration (they even say that there are families who drive round on these roads in their mobile homes without ever leaving). It creates a different state of mind, and the European driver very quickly gives up his aggressive, every-man-for-himself behaviour and his individual reactions, and adopts the rules of this collective game. 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. Thus the freeways do not de-nature the city or the landscape; they simply pass through it and unravel it without altering the desert character of this particular metropolis. And they are ideally suited to the only truly profound pleasure, that of keeping on the move.

To the person who knows the American freeways, their signs read like a litany. 'Right lane must exit.' This 'must exit' has always struck me as a sign of destiny. I have got to go, to expel myself from this paradise, leave this providential highway which leads nowhere, but keeps me in touch with everyone. This is the only real society or warmth here, this collective propulsion, this compulsion – a compulsion of lemmings plunging suicidally together. Why should I tear myself away to revert to an individual trajectory, a vain sense of responsibility? 'Must exit': you are being sentenced. You are a player being exiled from the only – useless and glorious – form of collective existence. 'Through traffic merge left': they tell

you everything, everything is announced. Merely reading the signs that are essential to your survival gives you an extraordinary feeling of instant lucidity, of reflex 'participation', immediate and smooth. Of a functional participation that is reflected in certain precise gestures. The lines of traffic diverging towards Ventura Freeway and San Diego Freeway do not leave one another, they just separate out. At every hour of the day approximately the same number split off towards Hollywood or towards Santa Monica. Pure, statistical energy, a ritual being acted out – the regularity of the flows cancels out individual destinations. What you have here is the charm of ceremonies: you have the whole of space before you, just as ceremonies have the whole of time before them.

The point is not to write the sociology or psychology of the car, the point is to drive. That way you learn more about this society than all academia could ever tell you.

The way American cars have of leaping into action, of taking off so smoothly, by virtue of their automatic transmission and power steering. Pulling away effortlessly, noiselessly eating up the road, gliding along without the slightest bump (the surfaces of the highways and freeways are remarkable, matched only by the fluidity of the cars' performance), braking smoothly but instantly, riding along as if you were on a cushion of air, leaving behind the old obsession with what is coming up ahead, or what is overtaking you (there is an unspoken agreement on collective driving here; in Europe we have only the highway code). All this creates a new experience of space, and, at the same time, a new experience of the whole social system. All you need to know about American society can be gleaned from an anthropology of its driving behaviour. That behaviour tells you much more than you could ever learn from its political ideas. Drive ten thousand

miles across America and you will know more about the country than all the institutes of sociology and political science put together.

The city was here before the freeway system, no doubt, but it now looks as though the metropolis has actually been built around this arterial network. It is the same with American reality. It was there before the screen was invented, but everything about the way it is today suggests it was invented with the screen in mind, that it is the refraction of a giant screen. This is not like a Platonic shadowplay, but more as if everything were carried along by, and haloed in, the gleam of the screen. Along with flux and mobility, the screen and its refraction are fundamental determinants of everyday events. A fusion of the kinetic and the cinematic produces a different mental configuration and overall perception from our own. You do not find mobility or the screen taking precedence over reality in the same way in Europe, where things most often remain within the static form of territory, the palpable form of substances.

In fact, the cinema here is not where you think it is. It is certainly not to be found in the studios the tourist crowds flock to – Universal, Paramount, etc., those subdivisions of Disneyland. If you believe that the whole of the Western world is hypostatized in America, the whole of America in California, and California in MGM and Disneyland, then this is the microcosm of the West.

In fact what you are presented with in the studios is the degeneration of the cinematographic illusion, its mockery, just as what is offered in Disneyland is a parody of the world of the imagination. The sumptuous age of stars and images is reduced to a few artificial tornado effects, pathetic fake buildings, and childish tricks which the crowd pretends to be taken in by to avoid

feeling too disappointed. Ghost towns, ghost people. The whole place has the same air of obsolescence about it as Sunset or Hollywood Boulevard. You come out feeling as though you have been put through some infantile simulation test. Where is the cinema? It is all around you outside, all over the city, that marvellous, continuous performance of films and scenarios. Everywhere but here.

It is not the least of America's charms that even outside the movie theatres the whole country is cinematic. The desert you pass through is like the set of a Western, the city a screen of signs and formulas. It is the same feeling you get when you step out of an Italian or a Dutch gallery into a city that seems the very reflection of the paintings you have just seen, as if the city had come out of the paintings and not the other way about. The American city seems to have stepped right out of the movies. To grasp its secret, you should not, then, begin with the city and move inwards to the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards to the city. It is there that cinema does not assume an exceptional form, but simply invests the streets and the entire town with a mythical atmosphere. That is where it is truly gripping. This is why the cult of stars is not a secondary phenomenon, but the supreme form of cinema, its mythical transfiguration, the last great myth of our modernity. Precisely because the idol is merely a pure, contagious image, a violently realized ideal. They say that stars give you something to dream about, but there is a difference between dreaming and fascination by images. The screen idols are immanent in the unfolding of life as a series of images. They are a system of luxury prefabrication, brilliant syntheses of the stereotypes of life and love. *They embody one single passion only: the passion for images*, and the immanence of desire in the image. They are not something to dream about; they are the dream. And they have all the characteristics of dreams: they produce a marked condensation (crystallization) effect and an

effect of contiguity (they are immediately contagious), and, above all, they have that power of instantaneous visual materialization (*Anschaulichkeit*) of ~~desire, which is also a feature of dreams. They do not, therefore, feed the~~ romantic or sexual imagination; they are immediate visibility, immediate transcription, material collage, precipitation of desire. Fetishes, fetish objects, that have nothing to do with the world of the imagination, but everything to do with *the material fiction of the image*.

In 1989 the Revolutionary Olympic Games will be held in Los Angeles to mark the bicentenary of the French Revolution. The flame of history passes to the West Coast. This is normal. Everything that disappears in Europe is born again in San Francisco. We may envisage a reconstruction of the great revolutionary scenes in giant holograms, the most extensive archives, a complete film library, the best actors, the best historians. A century from now you will not be able to tell the difference. It will be as if the Revolution had taken place here. If the Getty villa at Malibu were suddenly engulfed by lava, what difference would there be, a few centuries from now, between that building and the ruins of Pompeii?

What would the promoters of the bicentenary do if a new revolution broke out between now and 1989? But there is no way that can happen. And yet you cannot help but wish that the actual event might really occur and short-circuit the simulacrum, or that the simulacrum might itself end in catastrophe. In the same way, at Universal Studios, you hope constantly that the special effects will turn into some real drama. But this is a final nostalgia which has actually been exploited by the cinema itself (*Westworld, Future World*). The Olympic Games – total happening, collective participation in national self-celebration. 'We did it!' We are the best. Reagan style. It would have taken another Leni Riefenstahl to film this new Berlin '36. Totally sponsored, totally euphoric, totally clean, a 100 per cent advertising event.

No accidents, no catastrophes, no terrorism, no traffic-jams on the freeways, no panic and . . . no Soviets. In short, an image of an ideal world, for the whole world to see. But after the national orgasm a sort of collective melancholy comes over the Angelinos, showing how provincial this metropolis still is.

If you get out of your car in this centrifugal metropolis, you immediately become a delinquent; as soon as you start walking, you are a threat to public order, like a dog wandering in the road. Only immigrants from the Third World are allowed to walk. It is, in a sense, their privilege, a privilege that goes along with that of occupying the empty hearts of the big cities. For other people, walking, fatigue, or muscular activity have become rare commodities, 'services' costing a lot of money. Thus, ironically, the old state of affairs has been inverted. Similarly, the queues at high-class restaurants or fashionable nightclubs are often longer than those at soup kitchens. This is democracy. The signs of the most utter poverty always have at least a chance of becoming fashionable.

One of America's specific problems is fame and glory, partly on account of its extreme rarity these days, but also because of its extreme vulgarization. 'In the future, everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes' (Andy Warhol). And it is true. Take, for example, the man who got on the wrong plane and found himself carted off to Auckland, New Zealand, instead of Oakland, near San Francisco. This event made him the hero of the day. He was interviewed everywhere and they are making a film about him. In this country, it is not the highest virtue, nor the heroic act, that achieves fame, but the uncommon nature of the least significant destiny. There is plenty for everyone, then, since the more conformist the system as a whole becomes,

the more millions of individuals there are who are set apart by some tiny peculiarity. The slightest vibration in a statistical model, the tiniest whim of a computer are enough to bathe some piece of abnormal behaviour, however banal, in a fleeting glow of fame.

Like this white Christ carrying a heavy cross down Main Street, Venice. It is a very hot day. You want to tell him it has already been done, two thousand years ago. But he is not trying to do anything new. He is just carrying his cross the same way as other people carry 'Jesus Saves' or 'Know Jesus' badges on their cars. You could point out that no one – not a single person – is watching, and that he is accorded only indifference and derision as he passes. But he would tell you that was exactly how it was two thousand years ago.

The top of the Bonaventure Hotel. Its metal structure and its plate-glass windows rotate slowly around the cocktail bar. The movement of the skyscrapers outside is almost imperceptible. Then you realize that it is the platform of the bar that is moving, while the rest of the building remains still. In the end I get to see the whole city revolve around the top of the hotel. A dizzy feeling, which continues inside the hotel as a result of its labyrinthine convolution. Is this still architecture, this pure illusionism, this mere box of spatio-temporal tricks? Ludic and hallucinogenic, is this post-modern architecture?

No interior/exterior interface. The glass facades merely reflect the environment, sending back its own image. This makes them much more formidable than any wall of stone. It's just like people who wear dark glasses. Their eyes are hidden and others see only their own reflection. Everywhere the transparency of interfaces ends in internal refraction. Everything pretentiously termed 'communication' and 'interaction' – walk-man, dark glasses, automatic household appliances, hi-tech cars, even the

perpetual dialogue with the computer – ends up with each monad retreating into the shade of its own formula, into its self-regulating little corner and its artificial immunity. Blocks like the Bonaventure building claim to be perfect, self-sufficient miniature cities. But they cut themselves off from the city more than they interact with it. They stop seeing it. They refract it like a dark surface. And you cannot get out of the building itself. You cannot fathom out its internal space, but it has no mystery; it is just like those games where you have to join all the dots together without any line crossing another. Here too everything connects, without any two pairs of eyes ever meeting.

It is the same outside.

A camouflaged individual, with a long beak, feathers, and a yellow cagoule, a madman in fancy dress, wanders along the sidewalks downtown, and nobody, but nobody, looks at him. They do not look at other people here. They are much too afraid they will throw themselves upon them with unbearable, sexual demands, requests for money or affection. Everything is charged with a somnambulist violence and you must avoid contact to escape its potential discharge. Now that the mad have been let out of the asylums everyone is seen as a potential madman. Everything is so informal, there is so little in the way of reserve or manners (except for that eternal film of a smile, which offers only a very flimsy protection), that you feel anything could blow up at any moment. By some chain reaction, all this latent hysteria could be released at a stroke. The same feeling in New York, where panic is almost the characteristic smell of the city streets. Sometimes it takes the form of a gigantic breakdown, as in 1976.

All around, the tinted glass facades of the buildings are like faces: frosted surfaces. It is as though there were no one inside the buildings, as if there were no one behind the faces. And there *really* is no one. This is what the ideal city is like.

First International Bank. Crocker Bank. Bank of America. Pentecostal Savings (or is that one a church?). All bunched together in the heart of the city, alongside the big airlines. Money is fluid. Like grace, it is never yours. Coming to claim it is an offence against the divinity. Have you deserved this favour? Who are you and what are you going to do with it? You are suspected of wanting to put it to some use, and an evil one no doubt, whereas money is so beautiful in the fluid and intemporal state it is in at the bank, when it is being invested rather than spent. Shame on you and kiss the hand that gives it to you.

It is true that ownership of money burns your fingers, like power. We need people to take this risk for us and we should be eternally grateful to them. This is why I hesitate to deposit money in a bank. I am afraid I shall never dare to take it out again. When you go to confession and entrust your sins to the safe-keeping of the priest, do you ever come back for them? And yet the atmosphere in a bank is that of the confessional (there is no more kafkaesque situation): admit that you have money, confess that this is not normal. And it is true: having money is an awkward situation, from which the bank is only too happy to deliver you: 'Your money interests us' – the bank holds you to ransom, its greed knows no bounds. Its immodest gaze reveals your private parts to you, and you are forced to hand your money over to appease it. One day I tried to close my account, taking all the money out in cash. The teller would not let me go with such a sum on me: it was obscene, dangerous, immoral. Would I not at least take travellers' cheques? 'No, the whole lot in cash'. I was mad. In America, you are stark raving mad if, instead of believing in money and its marvellous fluidity, you want to carry it round on you in banknotes. Money is dirty; that you must admit. And we really do need all these concrete and metal sanctuaries to protect us from it. So banks fulfil a crucial social function, and it is quite logical that these buildings should form the monumental heart of every town and city.

One of the finest things there is, at dawn: the Santa Monica pier, with the white waves rolling in, the sky grey over Venice, the pale green or turquoise hotel overlooking the sands, and the endless line of run-down motels with their grimy little lamps, their graffiti-covered walls. The first waves, already frequented by a few insomniac surfers, the oh-so-melancholy palm trees with their Roaring Twenties grace, and the merry-go-round. The bay that bends round towards Long Beach is as vast as the Bay of Ipanema in Rio, the only one of comparable size. But, unlike Rio with its proud, luxurious, and pretentious (though none the less beautiful) sea front, here the town ends almost in a piece of wasteland at the ocean, like a seaside suburb. And it has indeed the hazy charm of just such a suburb. Here at dawn, it is one of the most insignificant shorelines in the world, just a place to go fishing. The Western World ends on a shore devoid of all signification, like a journey that loses all meaning when it reaches its end. The immense metropolis of Los Angeles peters out here in the sea like a desert, with all the nonchalance of a desert.

'LIVE OR DIE': the graffiti message on the pier at Santa Monica is mysterious, because we really have no choice between life and death. If you live, you live, if you die, you die. It is like saying 'be yourself, or don't be!' It is stupid, and yet it is enigmatic. You could read it to mean that you should live intensely or else disappear, but that is banal. Following the model of 'pay or die!', 'your money or your life!', it would become 'your life or your life!'. Stupid again, since you cannot exchange life for itself. And yet there is poetic force in this implacable tautology, as there always is when there is nothing to be understood. In the end, the lesson of this graffiti is perhaps: 'if you get more stupid than me, you die!'

Where the others spend their time in libraries, I spend mine in the deserts and on the roads. Where they draw their material from the history of ideas, I draw mine from what is happening now, from the life of the streets, the beauty of nature. This country is naive, so you have to be naive. Everything here still bears the marks of a primitive society: technologies, the media, total simulation (bio-, socio-, stereo-, video-) are developing in a wild state, in their original state. Insignificance exists on a grand scale and the desert remains the primal scene, even in the big cities. Inordinate space, a simplicity of language and character. . .

My hunting grounds are the deserts, the mountains, Los Angeles, the freeways, the Safeways, the ghost towns, or the downtowns, not lectures at the university. I know the deserts, their deserts, better than they do, since they turn their backs on their own space as the Greeks turned their backs on the sea, and I get to know more about the concrete, social life of America from the desert than I ever would from official or intellectual gatherings.

American culture is heir to the deserts, but the deserts here are not part of a Nature defined by contrast with the town. Rather they denote the emptiness, the radical nudity that is the background to every human institution. At the same time, they designate human institutions as a metaphor of that emptiness and the work of man as the continuity of the desert, culture as a mirage and as the perpetuity of the simulacrum.

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. They create a vision expurgated of all the rest: cities, relationships, events, media. They induce in me an exalting vision of the desertification of signs and men. They form the mental frontier where the projects of civilization run into the ground. They are outside the sphere and circumference of desire. We should always appeal to the deserts

against the excess of signification, of intention and pretention in culture. They are our mythic operator.

ROMERO SADDLE – CAMINO CIELO – BLUE CANYON – QUICK  
SILVER MINE – SYCAMORE CANYON – SAN RAPHAËL  
WILDERNESS

As night is falling, after three hours driving, I am lost in the San Raphaël Wilderness. Driving on and on towards the last of the sun's rays, then by the headlights reflecting in the sand of the river bed. Will I get through or won't I? Darkness is falling all around: the prospect of spending the night here looms, but the whisky creates a delicious sense of abandon. At last, after two hours driving and a descent into hell, I am resurrected in heaven, on the Camino Cielo ridge, with an aerial, night-time view of the lights of Santa Barbara.

PORTERVILLE

The journey here through forests of orange trees, their leaves a deep, geometric green, laid out neatly on wild hillsides that are carpeted with undulating grass like animal fur and resemble the hills of Tuscany. A driveway lined by fifty palm trees, all the same height and absolutely symmetrical, leads up to a planter's house that is minuscule by comparison. All its shutters are closed. It could be a colonial scene, but in fact these are the western slopes of the Rockies, at the foot of Sequoia National Park. The road down into this town that is not really a town is as straight as the rows of orange trees and is peopled by Mexican slaves who have bought up their masters' old 1950s Chevrolets. You go down through an oleander-lined

avenue. But the real revelation is the town itself, which is completely devoid – to a point unintelligible to us Europeans – of any centre. You drive up and down every street in the town without being able to find anything remotely like a central point. Without even a bank, an administrative building, or a town hall, the town has no coordinates; it is like a plantation. The only sign of life: an American flag, just alongside the dead centre of the town, the hotel. This is the only three-storey building and its torn curtains flap through the broken window-panes in the warm late-afternoon wind. The hotel rooms can't even be opened. The Mexican owner can't find the keys. The prices are ridiculously low. You can spend a week here for twenty dollars. And yet in every room, with its sagging mattress and its dusty mirror, the TV is constantly on, apparently not for any resident, since it is on in the rooms that are open to the winds and those that can't even be opened. You can see the televisions, or at least their reflections, from the street, through the curtains. All the corridors, with their worn-out carpets, display a single sign: EXIT. You can leave in any direction you like. You can rent three rooms here for a week for the price of a night in an ordinary motel. Forty years ago, no doubt, it was a hotel for Bakersfield's smart set when they escaped to the cool of the mountains. Today it is the heart of Porterville, and an irrevocable process of decay has set in. But it is too hot to worry about that.

Darkness falls slowly on Porterville, and Saturday night fever begins. 'American Graffiti 85.' All the cars drive up and down the main thoroughfare in slow or animated procession, a collective parade, drinking, eating ice-creams, calling out from one car to the next (whereas in the daytime they all drive round oblivious of anyone else). Music, PA systems, beer, ice-cream. It is the same ceremony, on a smaller scale, as the slow nocturnal cruising on the Strip in Las Vegas, or the procession of cars on the Los Angeles freeways simply transformed into a Saturday night provincial extravaganza. The only element of culture, the only mobile element: the car. No cultural centre, no

centre of entertainment. A primitive society: the same motor identification, the same collective phantasy of an unfolding ritual – breakfast, movie, religious service, love and death – the whole of life as a drive-in. Truly magnificent. It is all in this parade of bulky capsules, luminous and silent (the whole thing passes off in relative silence with no gear changes and no overtaking; these are the same fluid monsters with their automatic transmissions, gliding along smoothly one behind the other). Nothing else will happen during the evening. Except that is for the madcap race between the 12-15-year-old girls – like cowgirls from a Western – which takes place in a corner of the town, under floodlights, in the dust kicked up by the horses, near the baseball park. And the next morning, Sunday morning, the deserted streets, streets hardly distinct from the desert, have a preternatural calm about them. The air is transparent, with the orange trees all around. After the night's automobile ceremony the town is abandoned now to the light of its over-wide avenues, the lifeless stores, the half-awake service stations. Natural, orphaned light, without headlights or advertising signs. Just a few Mexicans cruise around in their long cars, while the first Whites wash theirs in front of their open verandas. The luminous insignificance of Sunday morning. A holographic micro-model of all America.

Death Valley is as big and mysterious as ever. Fire, heat, light: all the elements of sacrifice are here. You always have to bring something into the desert to sacrifice, and offer it to the desert as a victim. A woman. If something has to disappear, something matching the desert for beauty, why not a woman?

Nothing is more alien to American deserts than symbiosis (loose-fitting clothing, slow rhythms, oases) such as you find in native desert cultures. Here, everything human is artificial. Furnace Creek is a synthetic, air-conditioned oasis. But there is nothing more beautiful than artificial coolness

in the midst of heat, artificial speed in the middle of a natural expanse, electric light under a blazing sun, or the artificial practice of gambling in lost casinos. Reyner Banham is right: Death Valley and Las Vegas are inseparable; you have to accept everything at once, an unchanging timelessness and the wildest instantaneity. There is a mysterious affinity between the sterility of wide open spaces and that of gambling, between the sterility of speed and that of expenditure. That is the originality of the deserts of the American West; it lies in that violent, electric juxtaposition. And the same applies to the whole country: you must accept everything at once, because it is this telescoping that gives the American way of life its illuminating, exhilarating side, just as, in the desert, everything contributes to the magic of the desert. If you approach this society with the nuances of moral, aesthetic, or critical judgement, you will miss its originality, which comes precisely from its defying judgement and pulling off a prodigious confusion of effects. To side-step that confusion and excess is simply to evade the challenge it throws down to you. The violence of its contrasts, the absence of discrimination between positive and negative effects, the telescoping of races, technologies, and models, the waltz of simulacra and images here is such that, as with dream elements, you must accept the way they follow one another, even if it seems unintelligible; you must come to see this whirl of things and events as an irresistible, fundamental datum.

The distinctions that are made elsewhere have little meaning here. It would be misguided to focus on aspects of an American civility that is often in fact far superior to our own (in our land of 'high culture') and then to point out that in other respects the Americans are barbarians. It would be wrong-headed to counterpose Death Valley, the sublime natural phenomenon, to Las Vegas, the abject cultural phenomenon. For the one is the hidden face of the other and they mirror each other across the desert, the one as acme of secrecy and silence, the other as acme of prostitution and theatricality.

Having said that, there is something mysterious about Death Valley *in itself*. However beautiful the deserts of Utah and California may be, this one is something else again – something *sublime*. The *preternatural heat haze* that enshrouds it, its inverse depth – below sea level – this landscape with its underwater features, its salt surfaces and mudhills, the high mountain chains surrounding it, making it a kind of inner sanctuary – a gentle, spectral place of initiation (which comes from its geological depth and the atmosphere of spiritual limbo). What has always struck me about Death Valley is its *mildness*, its pastel shades and its fossil veil, the misty fantasmagoria of its mineral opera. There is nothing funereal or morbid about it: a transverberation in which everything is palpable, the mineral softness of the air, the mineral substance of the light, the corpuscular fluid of the colours, the total extraversion of one's body in the heat. A fragment of another planet (at least predating any form of human life), where another, deeper temporality reigns, on whose surface you float as you would on salt-laden waters. The senses, the mind, and even your sense of belonging to the human race are all numbed by the fact of having before you the pure, unadulterated sign of 180 million years, and therefore the implacable enigma of your own existence. It is the only place where it is possible to relive, alongside the physical spectrum of colours, the spectrum of the inhuman metamorphoses that preceded us, our successive historical forms: the mineral, the organic, salt desert, sand dunes, rock, ore, light, heat, everything the earth has been, all the inhuman forms it has been through, gathered together in a single anthologizing vision.

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. When you come out of the Mojave, writes Banham, it is difficult to focus less than fifteen miles ahead of you. Your eye can no longer rest on objects that are near. It can no

longer properly settle on things, and all the human or natural constructions that intercept your gaze seem irksome obstacles which merely corrupt the *perfect reach of your vision*. When you emerge from the desert, your eyes go on trying to create emptiness all around; in every inhabited area, every landscape they see desert beneath, like a watermark. It takes a long time to get back to a normal vision of things and you never succeed completely. Take this substance from my sight! . . . But the desert is more than merely a space from which all substance has been removed. Just as silence is not what remains when all noise has been suppressed. There is no need to close your eyes to hear it. For it is also the silence of time.

And even the foreshortening effect of cinema is present in Death Valley, for all this mysterious geology is also a scenario. The American desert is an extraordinary piece of drama, though in no sense is it theatrical like an Alpine landscape, nor sentimental like the forest or the countryside. Nor eroded and monotonous like the sub-lunar Australian desert. Nor mystical like the deserts of Islam. It is purely, geologically dramatic, bringing together the sharpest, most ductile shapes with the gentlest, most lascivious underwater forms – the whole metamorphism of the earth's crust is present in synthesis, in a miraculous abridged version. All the intelligence of the earth and its elements gathered together here, in a matchless spectacle: a geological epic. Cinema is not alone in having given us a cinematic vision of the desert. Nature itself pulled off the finest of its special effects here, long before men came on the scene.

It is useless to seek to strip the desert of its cinematic aspects in order to restore its original essence; those features are thoroughly superimposed upon it and will not go away. The cinema has absorbed everything – Indians, *mesas*, canyons, skies. And yet it is the most striking spectacle in the world. Should we prefer 'authentic' deserts and deep oases? For us

moderns, and ultramoderns, as for Baudelaire, who knew that the secret of true modernity was to be found in artifice, the only natural spectacle that is really gripping is the one which offers both the most moving profundity *and at the same time the total simulacrum of that profundity. As here, where the depth of time is revealed through the (cinematic) depth of field.* Monument Valley is the geology of the earth, the mausoleum of the Indians, and the camera of John Ford. It is erosion and it is extermination, but it is also the tracking shot, the movies. All three are mingled in the vision we have of it. And each phase subtly terminates the preceding one. The extermination of the Indians put an end to the natural cosmological rhythm of these landscapes, to which their magical existence was bound for millennia. With the arrival of pioneer civilization an extremely slow process gave way to a much quicker one. But this process itself was overtaken fifty years later by the tracking shots of the cinema which speeded up the process even more and, in a sense, put an end to the disappearance of the Indians by reviving them as extras. Thus this landscape has been witness to all the great events both of geology and anthropology, including some of the most recent. Hence the exceptional scenic qualities of the deserts of the West, combining as they do the most ancestral of hieroglyphs, the most vivid light, and the most total superficiality.

Colours there seem rarefied, detached from all substance, diffracted into the air, floating on the surface of things. Hence the spectral, ghostly, and at the same time veiled, translucent, calm, and subtle impression made by these landscapes. And the mirage effect – a temporal mirage too – which comes near to total illusion. The rocks, sands, crystals, and cacti are eternal, but they are also ephemeral, unreal, and detached from their substance. The vegetation is minimal, but indestructible, and each new spring sees a miracle of bloom. By contrast, light itself has substance here. Floating like a powder

on the air, it gives all shades of colour that pastel nuance that seems the very image of disincarnation, of the separation of the body from the spirit. In this sense, one may speak of the abstraction of the desert, of a deliverance from the organic, a deliverance that is beyond the body's abject passage into carnal inexistence, into that dry, luminous phase of death in which the corruption of the body reaches completion. The desert is beyond this accursed phase of decomposition, this humid phase of the body, this organic phase of nature.

The desert is a sublime form that banishes all sociality, all sentimentality, all sexuality. Words, even when they speak of the desert, are always unwelcome. Caresses have no meaning, except from a woman who is herself of the desert, who has that instantaneous, superficial animality in which the fleshly is combined with dryness and disincarnation. And yet, in another sense, there is nothing to match night falling in its shroud of silence on Death Valley, seen from broken-down, worn-out motel chairs on the verandah, looking out over the dunes. The heat does not fall off here. Only night falls, its darkness pierced by a few car headlights. And the silence is something extraordinary, as though it were itself all ears. It is not the silence of cold, nor of barrenness, nor of an absence of life. It is the silence of the whole of this heat over the mineral expanses that stretch out before us for hundreds of miles, the silence of the gentle wind upon the salt mud of Badwater, caressing the ore deposits of Telegraph Peak. A silence internal to the Valley itself, the silence of underwater erosion, below the very waterline of time, as it is below the level of the sea. No animal movement. Nothing dreams here, nothing talks in its sleep. Each night the earth plunges into perfectly calm darkness, into the blackness of its alkaline gestation, into the happy depression of its birth.

Long before I left, I could not get Santa Barbara out of my mind. Santa Barbara is simply a dream and it has in it all the processes of dreams: the wearisome fulfilment of all desires, condensation, displacement, facility of action. All this very quickly becomes unreal. Happy days! This morning a bird came to my balcony to die. I photographed it. But no one is indifferent to his own life and the least event still has something moving about it. I was here in my imagination long before I actually came here. Suddenly this stay has become a sojourn in a previous existence. In the last weeks, time seemed multiplied by a feeling of no longer being there and of living Santa Barbara each day, with its fatal charm and its blandness, as the predestined site of an eternal return.

Things fade into the distance faster and faster in the rear-view mirror of memory. Two and a half months disappear in a few moments, even quicker than the jet lag when your mind readjusts to Europe. It's not easy keeping your sense of wonderment alive or the first flashes of surprise, or even recalling what it felt like when things were still unexpected. Things last no longer than the time it takes for them to happen. It used to be the agreeable custom that you went to see the same film more than once. We are losing that habit. I doubt now whether we really see our whole life flashing before us at the moment of our death. The very possibility of the Eternal Return is becoming precarious: that marvellous perspective presupposes that things unfold in a necessary, predestined order, the sense of which lies beyond them. There is nothing like that today; things merely follow on in a flabby order that leads nowhere. Today's Eternal Return is that of the infinitely small, the fractal, the obsessive repetition of things on a microscopic and inhuman scale. It is not the exaltation of a will, nor the sovereign affirmation of an event, nor its consecration by an immutable sign, such as Nietzsche sought, but the viral recurrence of microprocesses. This is, admittedly,

inescapable, but no powerful sign presents it to the imagination as predestined (neither nuclear explosions nor viral implosions can be named by the imagination). Such are the events which surround us: micro-processive and instantaneously obliterated.

Coming back from California means re-entering a world you have known and lived in, but doing so without feeling the charm you might expect at returning to a former life. You had left that world behind in the hope it might be thoroughly transformed in your absence, but nothing of the sort has occurred. It got along quite nicely without you and it adjusts quite smoothly to your return. People and things conspire to make it seem as if you had not been away. For my own part, I left it all without regrets and I come back to it again without any great emotion. People are a thousand times more preoccupied with their own little lives than with the strangeness of another world. You are best advised, then, to land discreetly, to come back politely into this world keeping anything you may have to say – along with the few sights still gleaming in your memory – strictly to yourself.

The confrontation between America and Europe reveals not so much a *rapprochement* as a distortion, an unbridgeable rift. There isn't just a gap between us, but a whole chasm of modernity. You are born modern, you do not become so. And we have never become so. What strikes you immediately in Paris is that you are in the nineteenth century. Coming from Los Angeles, you land back in the 1800s. Every country bears a sort of historical predestination, which almost definitively determines its characteristics. For us, it is the bourgeois model of 1789 – and the interminable decadence of that model – that shapes our landscape. There is nothing we can do about it: everything here revolves around the nineteenth-century bourgeois dream.