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Postmodern Simultaneity versus European History in Contemporary Travel-Writing: A study of Jean Baudrillard, Pico Iyer, Umberto Eco

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Abstract

The 21st-century metropolis is dominated by quick changes and a distortion of traditional space and time. This paper studies how temporal distance is suppressed and how simultaneity overwrites history in *The Global Soul* by Pico Iyer, *America* by Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco's "Travels in Hyperreality". History does not simply disappear: it is recycled. Torn between two versions, the traditional European history, and the rewritings of it by the United States, history appears a keenly contested field. This article investigates the fate of history when it is embroiled into hyperreal mechanisms. In the American landscape, the fast pace of the postmodern era is epitomized and created by cars. Movement and immediacy replace history. This forward movement flattens out and re-processes history in order to fuel an hyperreal reconstruction of it. On the one hand, by providing the raw material for this process, Europe, and above all the old English motherland, asserts its stranglehold over History and appears a stronghold of stability and fixity. On the other hand, the United States brings about a creative apocalypse: it both destroys history and preserves it in the form of simulacra.

Keywords: History, globalization, simultaneity, empire, hyperreality, instantaneity, simulacra, United States

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Introduction

Investigating the fate of history in a hyperreal setting

History can be seen as a backdrop of unchangeable events leading to the present in which we are born. Until the 19th century, these events required considerable time to unfold: it took up to three months to cross the Atlantic, and all letters depended on horses to reach their destinations. From the Industrial Revolution to the advent of the car, the plane, and the digital age, humankind has leaped into a swift-paced age: the postmodern era. The present in which we are born is now looking at the road ahead rather than at the road behind. The pair past/future finds its geographical twin image in the pair Europe/United States. Traditional European history competes with the rewritings of it by the United States. This article investigates the fate of History when it is embroiled into hyperreal mechanisms, and the consequences of temporal distance suppression in three texts: *The Global Soul* by Pico Iyer, *America* by Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco's "Travels in Hyperreality". All three authors immersed themselves in big cities, centers of economic power and globalisation. All three traveled to locations that can be called hyperreal. The hyperreal is a frame wherein space and time are modified and replaced by simultaneity. According to Holland and Huggan (1998), Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard define the hyperreal as a simulated reality which tries to replace authentic reality (p. 24). I will add that hyperreality is a *heightened* version of reality: it exceeds reality, it has more colours, more dimensions, and what interests us the most in this study, increased speed. Hyperreality is a feature of postmodernity, an era also characterized by consumerism, television, capitalism and simulation. Within this temporal framework, the aesthetic movement of postmodernism took wing, advocating mobility and instability, re-reading history and hierarchies. Because it endorses a language of multiplicity, postmodernism conflicts with history understood as a set of unchangeable facts. Indeed, if we follow Zygmunt Bauman's words (1997), the existence of multiple viewpoints implies that "nothing can be known for sure and anything which is known can be known in a different way" (p. 6). If we look at how history is approached and understood in the postmodern era, we notice a shift of perspective. The emphasis shifts from the past immutability of events to the forward movement re-interpreting them.

This article investigates what happens to history when it is absorbed, devoured and preserved by hyperreal mechanisms that are mostly at play in the United States. For the most part, the history thusly absorbed is the imperialistic history of the old continent. As a consequence, I will examine whether Europe's long-lasting traditions still act as fixed anchors in an ever-changing world. First, we will see that the fast pace of the postmodern age is epitomized and created by cars. Then, I will study the process of "past-izing" (Eco, 1986, p. 10) and the accumulative digestion of European history, before discussing whether Europe still has a monopoly over history. Finally, I will investigate what may be considered a postmodern apocalypse: the destructive mechanism set in motion by preservation.

Eco, Baudrillard and Iyer: their intentions

Baudrillard was a French sociologist and philosopher who reflected on the way media communication influenced our system of signs. His travels in the United States are recorded in *America*. He specifically targeted vast, empty expanses, and chose them

as a lens through which he studied American hyperreality. He wrote that his “hunting ground [was] composed of deserts, *freeways*, *safeways*, *ghost towns* or *downtowns*, not university conferences” (2016, p. 63, emphasis in the text). Baudrillard (2016) explains that he “was looking for [...] the America of the vain and absolute freedom of the freeways, never the America of the social and the cultural – the America of arid speed, of motels and mineral surfaces” p. 10, my translation. The culture and traditions which are a product of history are completely obliterated by the speed and unfolding of vast stretches of land and roads. In 1986, the same year that saw the publishing of Baudrillard's *Amérique*, “Travels in Hyperreality” by Umberto Eco was translated from Italian to English. Umberto Eco (1986) undertakes his travels in the United States in search of “The Absolute Fake” (p. 34). The readers explores Disneyland, theme parks, collections of fake works and museums of wax statues alongside Eco. Both Eco and Baudrillard are European professors and semiologists addressing a well-read, initially European readership. Both admit being fascinated and repulsed by the United States they explore. The third author brought into play is Pico Iyer, a British citizen of Indian origin, a journalist and a writer. Pico Iyer does not adopt the position of a postcolonial subject; he presents himself as Oxford educated but working for America and living in Japan. *The Global Soul* is based on travels which took place in the 1990s. It was published in 2001, before September 11th, and focuses on the exploration of Western and Eastern economic centers: Japan, Hong Kong, Atlanta.

1. Swallowing up the miles: postmodern immediacy

The citizens of developed nations experience movement in their everyday lives from the driver or passenger seat. The United States are taken by Iyer, Eco and Baudrillard as the perfect example of a nation and a landscape determined by the use of the car. The car's movement and speed are inscribed on the bodies of the drivers. Driving on Los Angeles' freeways, Baudrillard (2016) wrote that “[t]he machines themselves [...] have created an environment that resembles them [...] [T]he system of freeways [...] creates a different state of mind” (p. 54). The cars are no longer subdued to their human creators; they take over. In this sentence, the cars and the roads are the real actors since they determine both the environment and the driver. Baudrillard (2016) gave the car and its movement such importance that he decided to use them as a cognitive tool, as a method to research the American society:

The point is not the sociology or psychology of the car. It is to drive in order to know more about society than all the disciplines united could tell us. [...] Pulling yourself effortlessly, devouring the space without a sound, sliding without a tremor [...], braking softly albeit instantaneously, progressing as if on an air cushion, having only the obsession of what comes in front of you, and what overtakes you [...] – all this creates a new experience of space, and the entire societal system in the same movement.
p. 55.

Seven-lines long catalogues and lists can be found in all three books studied. In this excerpt, the list of present progressive “-ing” forms, which is, in fact, in French, a list of infinitive verbs, imitates the rhythm and movement of driving, and gives the impression of ease, comfort, and focus. The driver, barely visible, merges with the car

in the pronoun “you”. Both driver and car are outshone by the movement of the vehicle, which is at the centrestage. We notice that the driver is caught in an unfolding immediacy. He does pause to reflect upon America or anything else. His only obsession is that of the future: “what comes in front of you, and what overtakes you” (2016, p. 55). There is no past to behold through the windscreen; the present is hardly seized. Only the future is of importance.

In “Travels in Hyperreality”, Eco (1986) draws a portrait of Los Angeles in similar terms. The city is surrounded with highways, and the human body merges with the car:

And thus in the great expanses that were colonized late, where the posturban civilization represented by Los Angeles is being born, in a metropolis made up of seventy-six different cities where alleyways are ten-lane freeways and man considers his root foot a limb designed for pressing the accelerator, and the left an atrophied appendix, because cars no longer have a clutch – eyes are something to focus, at steady driving speed, on visual-mechanical wonders, signs, constructions that must impress the mind in the space of a few seconds.
p.26.

No human limb shaped the car; the car shaped them. The feet and eyes are “designed” for the universe of speed, not for braking but for accelerating only. The thoughts do not focus long, but are swept by quick sights. The readers also notice that the environment is adapted to the speed of the car. The artificial cityscape and the conditions set by cars establish the use and shape of the human body, which loses control over both its environment and itself. Since it is limited to “the space of a few seconds”, the time frame is not on human scale either. Rather, it escapes the grasp and mastery of humankind. It is fleeting and subordinate to movement.

The template of the American car-city makes its appearance in Iyer's text under the traits of Atlanta:

Yet Atlanta at first sight looked like nowhere on earth: suburb led to interstate led to off-ramp led to suburb. I passed an Economy Inn, a Quality Inn, a Comfort Inn, a Days Inn; I passed a Holiday Inn Select, which gave way, soon enough, to a Holiday Inn Express. On every side of me were look-alike office blocks and landscaped driveways, mirror-glass buildings and office parks: all the interchangeable props of an International Style that could, in its latest incarnation, be called Silicon Neo-Colonial.
2001, p. 185.

Atlanta “looked like nowhere on earth”, which almost renders it extraterrestrial. Because it is inhuman, the city offers a Science-Fiction scenery. The roads lead nowhere, and the readers are caught in a perpetual movement, in a loop, with no actual destination. Like in Eco's Los Angeles, the mind does not pause to behold the landscape, given that no feature in it has been made unique and worth seeing. The road is lined with generic hotels, temporary dwelling advertising their own characteristics: quality, economy, comfort, swiftness. The places passed by are not worth stopping by: they are generic copies belonging to hotel chains, and are denied

an individual name, a history and character. The peculiar purpose of this city – a corporate city – is best grasped from the car.

2. Devouring all pasts: reprocessing European History

The perpetual movement witnessed by the readers is a movement of retrieval. In its forward motion, postmodern instantaneity acts as a steamroller, flattening out history. Simultaneously, it re-processes it in order to fuel the construction of hyperreality. Just like the cars devour the roads, the United States devours the past. According to Eco (1986) and Baudrillard (2016), the United States is a country with no history. Baudrillard writes that “America [...] has neither past nor founding truth” (p. 76). Rephrasing the words of J. Paul Getty, an American industrialist and founder of wealthy art institutions – in other words a tycoon anchored in mastering the present while revering the past – Eco (1986) wrote that the United States was “a country with much future but no historical depth”, and that “the Absolute Fake”, which can be summed up as a merging of hyperreality and simulacra, “[was] offspring of the unhappy awareness of a present without depth” (pp. 33, 31). For Eco (1986), the West Coast, which lacks history the most, is guilty of “the original sin of 'the leveling of the pasts', the fusion of copy and original” (p. 9). This means that the United States puts on the same level real and fake works of art, fictional and historical events, and antique objects from every eras. An example of this “leveling of the pasts” would be William Randolph Hearst's castle. This palace served as model for *Citizen Kane*'s castle Xanadu. It is fraught with genuine art from all eras, kitsch copies and curiosities, with no overarching coherence:

The floor of the vestibule encloses a mosaic found in Pompeii, there are Gobelins on the walls, the door into the Meeting Hall is by Sansovino, the great hall is fake Renaissance presented as Italo-French. [...] The striking aspect of the whole is not the quantity of antique pieces plundered from half of Europe [...] but rather the sense of fullness [...] that is here achieved.

Eco, 1986, p.22.

It is the European past that is consumed by this mansion, and even “plundered”, a rather negative term underlining that the past has been illegitimately displaced. In other parts of the text, Eco (1986) talks of “voracity”, of “gluttony”, of “ravenous consumption” (pp. 23, 31, 9). From this assembly of ill-matched pieces, the United States generates its own version of history. The accumulative process of Europe's millennial history is mimicked by the United States: in order to match the European quantity of memories, the United States turns a large number of contemporary items into past. Both objects still in use and people who are still alive are turned into past. This process comes under Eco's scrutiny:

[i]t is immediately worth noting that a private home seventy years old is already archeology; and this tells us a lot about the ravenous consumption of the present and about the constant 'past-izing' process carried out by American civilization in its alternate process of futuristic planning and nostalgic remorse.

2016, p. 9-10.

The desire to have a past is expressed in Iyer's text by a reconstruction that is akin to Hearst's castle. In the United States, Iyer visits a mansion which luxury comes from the European traits it adopts. It has English fireguards, Italian marble, and overall, it is built to resemble England. However, the result is a rather humorous parody:

[...] in the place where ancestral portraits would be hung in the English country house it was designed to resemble, the 1928 confection had put up generic pictures of old people.
Iyer, 2001, p. 205.

These pictures are a parody of the original portraits: a parody of the old, hereditary atmosphere of a country house. They imitate the look of the original portraits, but not their symbolic contents. They have no substance, albeit a substance that lies in England.

3. The contest of the old and the new continents over Europe's questioned landmarks

The readers may wonder what distinctive feature belongs to European history and renders it so desirable. In Iyer, Eco and Baudrillard's texts, the main characteristic the United States seeks to reproduce is authenticity. Originally, an authentic item was defined by a well-established origin which could not be questioned, whereas its opposite, the derivative or the copy, was suspicious. Akin to the theoretical Golden Age, the authentic item has become irretrievable, if it existed at all. Postmodernism introduces a reversal in suspicion: the authority and legitimacy of the authentic are more dubious than the copy. As a consequence, we witness two opposite pulls: the quest for and the undermining of the authentic. In other words, the texts exhibit a tendency to use European history to ground the present and give it legitimacy, but they also question the European model of history.

Europe is still a frame of reference. In *The Global Soul*, Iyer seems unable to find value in the places he visits: they appear anonymous, contrary to the England of his childhood. It is only when his destinations – Hong Kong, for instance – imitate the former “motherland” that they become valuable:

Taking a tram (with “Cathay Pacific” written all over its sides) down to the Bank of China, I got out and started climbing the steep concrete slope to the Citibank Plaza – Hong Kong's Central district was a web of such anonymities – when suddenly I saw the towers of an Anglican church down the street. I walked along its entrance, stepped inside, and instantly I was in England, on a grey November morning, being prepared for a war – or an Empire – that never came. [...] Standing in this mock thirteenth-century Gothic cathedral, I could have been my father, in Bombay in 1937, reciting a borrowed litany [...]
2001, p.90.

In Hong Kong, the remnants of colonial order trigger in Iyer a string of childhood memories. This act of remembering brings back the authentic, the original, the reference: England. As he walks in the mist of “anonymities”, an Anglican church stands out on the background of dull streets, and he writes “I was in England”. He

does not mirror England and Hong Kong with a comparison, he uses a metaphor to collapse the image of Hong Kong utterly and give way to the one true homeland: England. Hong Kong's locations, such as "Bank of China" and "Citibank Plaza", belong to global trade. The presence of England suddenly reintroduces the notion of history with war and Empire, in a version of Hong Kong presented as a history-less trading place. England appears as a motherland from where inauthentic copies sprang. Thus, the cathedral is a "mock-thirteenth century cathedral" which means that it is inauthentic in relation to time and history, and the litany chanted within its walls is "borrowed", it does not belong to the person who sings it, it belongs to the Empire.

Going back further in time to older Empires, Ancient Rome and Greece remain landmarks in terms of grandeur, which is why Iyer (2001) describes Toronto as a "New Athens" (p. 140) and why Baudrillard (2016) describes the Salt Institute as "modeled on the palace of Minos" – a mythical king of Crete – (p. 10) and New York as "the heir to everything at the same time, Athens, Alexandria, Persepolis" (p. 19). Postmodernity superimposed over antiquity creates a palimpsest. Baudrillard (2016) rewrites the antique battle of marathon in a Manhattan setting: "[t]here are 17 000 runners, and the real battle of Marathon comes to mind, where they were not even 17 000 fighting. [...] 'We won!' whispers the Greek messenger of Marathon as he expires. 'I did it!' breathes the exhausted marathon runner while collapsing on the lawn of Central Park" (p. 25). Antiquity is born again as parody. Like the countryhouse portraits studied above, the resurrected elements of antiquity reappear under a degraded form.

The second pull is on the contrary a tendency to criticize Europe and to present America as superior and oriented towards the future. For Iyer (2001), Paris and London are "too old", "too amorphous", "too preoccupied", while Toronto, on the new continent, appears as a more open city (p. 123). For Baudrillard (2016), European cities are "Middle Age cities", and the streets are more alive in the United States than in France (pp. 23, 53). For our authors, Europe lives in the past. Traveling between his Californian home and his British boarding school as a child was like "traveling between 1441 and 1968" for Iyer (2001, p. 41) while for Baudrillard (2016), "[t]he first thing you notice in Paris is the 19th century. Coming from Los Angeles, you land in the 19th century" (p. 72). The United States is unburdened by traditions, it is free from the weight of time. Underneath the vast deserts explored by Baudrillard, we distinguish an America presented as a blank page. Baudrillard (2016) calls it "savage", "naive and primitive" (p. 95). It is a blank page that encourages the creativity of the writer, while Europe is forever stuck in its past:

America exorcises the question of origins, it does not cultivate any origin or mythical authenticity, it has neither past nor founding truth. Because it has never known any primitive accumulation of time, it lives in a perpetual present. Because it has never known a slow and centennial accumulation of a truth principle, it lives in perpetual simulation, in the perpetual present of signs.
Baudrillard, 2016, p.76.

The time frame of the United States is presented as having two rather than three dimensions: the present is heightened, the future lies ahead, but the past is forgotten. Instead of being one point on a continuous line stretching from the past to the future,

the present is a point floating freely. It is furthermore hyperreal, since it is made up of artificial “signs”.

4.Preservation or destruction? How simulacra bring about the apocalypse

If we are to believe Baudrillard (2016), the past artificially generated by the United States is superior to the history of Europe because it is a simulacra: “[y]es, California (and America along with it) offers the image of *our* decline, but *it* is not declining at all, it has a hyperreal vitality, and all the energy of a simulacrum” (p. 101, emphasis in the text). The United States rises on the backdrop of a falling Europe; the satirical simulacra constructed on European landmarks are alive with “vitality” and “energy”. Simulacra can be defined as the image of an image, a form of representation so distant from the original model that it constitutes an independent reality that can stand on its own. Simulacra are the third level of the representation system. In a museum, if visitors are faced with a statue and a painting of this statue, then the representation encompasses three levels: the living model, the statue (a representation or image), and the painting (a simulacrum). The simulacrum has little in common with the original model. It has also little in common with industrial copies, since contrary to them it introduces a variation from the original. the living model. Rather, it creates a new, independent reality, and seeks to bypass the original. In other words, it prompts the end of the traditional representation system, in which there was a model and an original artwork that could be designated as first and second, and told apart from the subsequent copies. The Venus is the most striking example of simulacrum in “Travels in Hyperreality”: in the Palace of Living Arts, a wax museum, the visitors are faced with a coloured wax statue of a Venus de Milo with arms (1986, p. 20). Insofar as it an image of an image (freely drawing inspiration from the original Venus de Milo), and because it bears little resemblance to the original it imitates, this statue can be regarded as a simulacrum. The simulacra have more value to the Americans than the originals, because they correspond to an ideal, atemporal, hyperreal world. First, they have more colours and more dimensions, which makes them *more* than the original items. Second, they belong to an atemporal world because they are so far removed from their models that there is no origin to be traced back. In addition, they are made as immortal tokens, and, as such, they escape history. Conversely, the originals, often old and worn out, are said to be disappearing. For instance, at Santa Cruz Museum, where Eco (1986) beholds numerous versions of The Last Supper, an audio commentary warns that “the original fresco is by now ruined, almost invisible, unable to give you the emotion you have received from the three-dimensional copy” (p. 18). The recorded voice serves a purpose: in a museum filled with simulacra, it is in its interest to have the visitors believe these simulacra are superior. As a consequence, this commentary's strategy is to speed up the disintegration of the original in the mind of the visitors. In all three texts preservation and destruction go hand in hand. First, the rise of the simulacra means the end of the traditional representation system, in which there was only the model and its aesthetical representation through art. Eco (1986) argues that the birth of simulacra originates in a desire to preserve the past:

[T]here is a constant in the average American imagination and taste, for which the past must be preserved and celebrated in full-scale authentic copy; a philosophy of immortality as duplication. [...] it dominates the relation with the self [...] with History and, even, with the European tradition.

p. 6.

Yet, In Eco's text, America is also seen as an all-devouring imperial power that causes the destruction of the former powers, called "primitive powers". The simulacra appears as a tool of imperialism, selecting and modifying what deserves to be upkept. This rewriting of history can be seen as a form of apocalypse. The American museums embody:

[An] ideology of preservation, in the New World, of the treasures that the folly and negligence of the Old World are causing to disappear into the void. Naturally this ideology conceals something [...] the fact that it is the entrepreneurial colonization by the New World [...] that makes the Old World's condition critical. Just like the crocodile tears of the Roman patrician who reproduced the grandeurs of the very Greece that his country had humiliated and reduced to a colony. And so the Last Beach ideology develops its thirst for preservation of art from an imperialistic efficiency, but at the same time it is the bad conscience of the white man who thus pays his debt to the destroyed primitive cultures.

Eco, 1986, p. 38-39.

Baudrillard's text is also haunted by the idea of a disappearing world. Dozens of derivatives of the word "disparition" are sprinkled over the text and associated with the desert Baudrillard seeks. Once he has immersed himself into a hyperreality made of European-inspired simulacra, the old version of Europe has been definitely overshadowed: it disappears and cannot be retrieved: "[i]n Los Angeles, Europe has disappeared" (2016, p. 81). This reading of the catastrophe is backed-up by Jameson (1991):

[T]he catastrophe is the substitution of the real by the simulacrum, which entails a derealization of the whole surrounding world of everyday reality. [...] The world momentarily loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density. But is it now a terrifying or an exhilarating experience?

p. 34.

Baudrillard would likely have answered that the derealization is an exhilarating experience that ought to be sought. For him, the simulacra constitute a brand new reality which allows a fresh gaze to be cast on the world. A world "without depth" can be equated with the surface of a blank page, ready for the writing down of new perceptions and interpretations. However, this renewal calls for a destruction of the previous order. In *Amérique*, the simulacrum embodies an obsession with perfection so extreme that it justifies the extermination of the original model, the destruction of the reference:

[...] everything deserves to be protected, embalmed, restored. Everything is the object of a second birth, the eternal birth of the simulacrum. Not

only are the Americans missionaries, but they are Anabaptist: as they missed the first, original baptism, they dream of baptizing everything a second time, and only grant value to this ulterior sacrament, which is, as we know, the second edition of the first, only more real – which is the perfect definition of the simulacrum. [...] To give things back in their exact shape, to present them to the Judgment Day, they are ready to destroy and exterminate [...].

Baudrillard, 2016, p. 44.

Similarly, taking the example of Tibet, Iyer (2001) explains that genuine locations are reconstructed by Hollywood and preserved through these copies only, while they are in the process of being destroyed. There is no attempt to preserve the authentic: “Tibet is now on the world's screens, impeccably recreated in the mountains of Morocco and Argentina, while the country itself draws ever closer to extinction” (p. 36).

Conclusion

In the era of hyperreality and postmodernity, European writers outline an American concept of history based on perpetual movement. The machines – cars and planes – impel a rhythm on this movement, which remains out of humankind's control. The facticity of history is abandoned in favour of its forward movement, and since the slowness of human life is incompatible with the United States desire for a more eventful history, fictions are created as a replacement for historical events and traditions. The United States accumulate miscellaneous pieces of European history, which remains a landmarks and an inspiration, but these pieces are digested and transformed into simulacra. The disappearance of a former order and the reconstruction of the past is viewed by Iyer, Eco and Baudrillard as a creative process allowing a release from a burdening history. Yet in order to sow their own seeds in the land of history, the United States threaten to symbolically destroy past events and works of art. Both Eco and Baudrillard bear witness to this process, since the *hyperreal* simulacra retrospectively alter the image they have of the European referents; the return to the simple *real* is jeopardized, and the simulacra brings forth an end to the traditional understanding of history as irreversible.

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