

“You Are Here”: On Driving with Baudrillard through the Desert

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In the very act of road-tripping in *America*, Baudrillard models the cobbled-togetherness of an American identity:

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. (55)

I find my experience is the same when searching for locations to film and photograph. As I bounce around on dirt roads I wonder if something will appear. The freedom of movement in the desert encourages me to look, make, and move. If I stay too long, I am no longer passing through. In Baudrillard’s observations on America, the road is the thread that connects place and people, providing glimpses of local color. If Baudrillard drove through this desert today, he’d find these once passive connecting roads now swirl within larger cities, having grown into self-sustaining desert islands. The freeway has become an insulated, closed-network system that transports Salt Lake to Vegas—or worse, Los Angeles to Los Angeles—and no place in-

between. By contrast, small desert towns like Wendover still live and die by constant thoroughfare movement. With no rivers, the flow of road is the only life-sustaining feature. It pulls us through out of necessity, desperation, and curiosity. The sublimity produced by such steady and uninterrupted movement in the desert is the catalyst behind my video work, *Coming 'Round the Mountain* (see fig. 1).

It has been over 30 years since the English translation of Jean Baudrillard's *America* was published in 1988, but I find myself rendering it in new terms when I drive through Utah's West Desert. I see what he saw, but no longer in the places he saw them. Now, only the remote and isolated locales remain aligned with his original observations.

Baudrillard's road trip diary documents his travels across the United States and lyrically recounts his observations on and analysis of what it might mean to be American. Baudrillard assesses how this "cataclysmic" place has been molded by time and space, history and money, and how those variables in turn mold the people living here (4). Baudrillard spends much of his writing in *America* logging his travels through the quintessential western landscape of the United States as a means to flesh out the undeniably American connection that exists between people and place. Early in the text, but present throughout, Baudrillard precisely unpacks the "equal and opposite" magic of Las Vegas and Salt Lake City (3) as an example of the harmonious American dichotomy. Since Baudrillard's journey in the late 80's, the relationship between these two desert cities, and the desert itself, has become less oppositional and more congruous: the large cities have now all but devoured the surrounding landscape and adjacent towns, bleeding together in the name of new metropolitan areas and growth. The growth-for-growth's-sake mentality, combined with the undying American dedication to creating and recreating "artificial paradises" (Baudrillard 8), which Baudrillard

had already noticed, has essentially made Salt Lake and Las Vegas indistinguishable in their paradisiacal nature. Driving now through isolated rural desert locales, however, I find that Baudrillard's claims indeed still apply. Here, his observations remain intact, preserved in their remoteness by the time and space of the desert.

Wendover is a town on the Utah-Nevada border. Technically, it's two towns: Wendover, Utah, and West Wendover, Nevada. This Janus-faced locale full of run-down casinos offers a strange and somehow reverent mimicry of Las Vegas, its Sin City twin to the south. However, because of its isolation, Wendover has maintained within itself certain dislocations that other, more connected, desert cities (Phoenix, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Salt Lake, Palm Springs) have lost to the expansion and homogenization described above. Solitude, I argue, is the umbilical cord of dis-located places. Within this solitude the residents of these places take pride in remoteness, resolute in their autonomy. Like a shoulder joint out of socket, dis-located places and people preserve their identities with and without disconnection. Namely, Wendover has kept intact what Baudrillard calls "the power of pure open space, the kind you find in the desert" (135). The power Baudrillard references here is "The power of the desert form: it is the erasure of traces in the desert, of the signified of signs in the cities, of any psychology in bodies. An animal and metaphysical fascination—the direct fascination of space, the immanent fascination of dryness and sterility" (Baudrillard 135). In other words, there remains something wild, surreal, and subversive enveloping this small gambling town. There is still a chance you'll see something you don't want to see. This is the quality people refer to when describing their nostalgia for "Old Las Vegas."

Having already bloomed, there is nothing left of the weirdness, charm, and potential violence in accrescent cities. If I no longer feel any reason to stop in Las Vegas or Salt Lake, it

is perhaps because I know there is another exit, and it won't make any difference. It is a matter of convenience *not* to stop. These expansive cities no longer require the traveler to top-off the gas tank or check the coolant in their overheated engines because the distances now are interconnected by highways and superhighways. In Wendover, there remains a risk in not stopping because, like an oasis, it appears as quickly as it disappears back into “dryness and sterility” (135).

It is this same arid fascination that motivates me to work in the desert, the way harshness impacts human behavior, tricking senses and confusing relationships. It is a place formed by chance and movement: by freeways, flash floods, fuel pumps, and fossils. When I make artwork in the desert, it is this aleatory pushback that requires the quickness of the camera, a fear of missing something in this slow place if I'm not fast enough. This tension echoes dis-location, creating harmony in that everything—including me—is perfectly out of place.



Fig. 1. Still from *Coming 'Round the Mountain*, Levi Jackson, 2018. Single channel video. Modern West Gallery, Salt Lake City, UT.

In the video *Coming 'Round the Mountain*, a man dressed as a cowboy drives through the desert in an old pickup truck, coasting as if on rails. The teal truck matches the color of the empty sky, filling most of the camera frame except for the occasional glimpse of green grass when the truck and tracking viewer are misaligned. Trancelike, he looks only west toward Wendover, stalwartly moving in space. When I drive through the desert, the flatness creates an illusion of everything slowed down, which I attempt to capture in the video. The distance combined with the absence of landmarks is transfixing. I find myself constantly checking the speedometer against my own perception of speed, disbelieving my instruments. In *Coming 'Round the Mountain*, the shot is tight and little is recognizable beyond the truck. The truck appears as fixed to the road as the viewer is to the driver. As the cowboy travels, white clouds and sunlight are projected onto the truck, dis-locating the driver, truck, landscape, and viewer. The soundtrack amplifies this daze. By significantly slowing down the melody from the American folk song, "She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain," the song, played by solo cello, acts as a lullaby. An added angelic crescendo appears each time the cowboy is touched by projected sunlight, momentarily pulling the viewer and the cowboy in and out of the low hum of travelling.

In *America*, Baudrillard describes driving as "a spectacular form of amnesia. Everything is to be discovered, everything to be obliterated" (10). Without signs and without places to stop the desert makes it easy to forget. Truly a feeling of no return, "It is a sort of slow-motion suicide" (Baudrillard 7). The Cowboy looks West, toward Wendover, unseen by driver or audience. Wendover is like a dream that, upon waking, can't be articulated. But that doesn't make it any less *there*.

Throughout the video, the surface of the truck takes on a projection of clouds, blurring and flipping the earth and the sky, oscillating between becoming, blinding, and breaking the horizon line. The sky matches the paint, the projector bulb produces the sun, the truck and driver seem both “right now” and “back then.” With this technological apparatus, I try to capture the phenomenon of deterritorialization Baudrillard describes in *America* when taking a flight from London to Los Angeles:

Deterritorialization begins with the disconnection of night and day. When their division is no longer a matter of time, but of space, altitude, and speed, and occurs cleanly, as if vertically, when you pass through the night as if it were a cloud, so fast that you can see it, as if it were a nearby object revolving around the earth, or by contrast, when it is reduced to nothing, the sun remaining at the same point in the sky for all twelve hours of the flight, then this already marks the end of our space-time, that same enchanted reality which will be that of the West. (137)

I believe the effect Baudrillard describes here can take place not only in flight, but in desert travelling, whenever movement alters our sense of place and time. Is there any difference between flying in the air at 500mph and driving across the desert at 100mph? A friend of mine once worked as a server at a casino in West Wendover. He lived in Salt Lake City and would shuttle, via a service called the “Party Bus,” 122.9 miles across the desert each morning and night. I’ve never been on the party bus, but when I imagine the commute, it’s impossible to think of the light and the silence—the monotony—as anything but evangelical.¹ In the video, the cowboy’s quest has the same effect.

Coming ‘Round the Mountain gets its final edge from what Baudrillard describes as “that brutal instant which reveals that the journey has no end. That there is no longer any

reason for it to come to an end. Beyond a certain point, it is movement itself that changes” (11). *Coming 'Round the Mountain* is eight minutes of an anonymous cowboy slowly gliding across the desert, intended to be viewed on repeat. Much like watching a rerun, in the desert there is an entrancing discomfort in waiting for something new to happen. Watching a rerun gives you permission to forget what you know and start searching. This structure mimics desert driving by calling into question space and time, when someone inevitably asks from the backseat, “are we there yet?” In Baudrillard’s terms, “It takes this surreality of the elements to eliminate nature’s picturesque qualities, just as it takes metaphysics of speed to eliminate the natural picturesqueness of travel (9). In the video’s ritualistic repetitions, the viewer is pushed to find the nuances and changes that only appear after forgetting what they’re looking at, seeing through it to a new place.

When moving this way through the desert, the “desert is no longer a landscape, it is a pure form produced by the abstraction of all others” (Baudrillard 137). This entropic abstraction is the tool and driving force of dis-located places. Here, it is the chance created by slowness that gives way to abstraction, and abstraction gives way to meaning. Right in front of you—just like a mirage—it answers back from the driver’s seat, promising: “You are here.”

Notes

¹ Here, I mean to evoke an older meaning of the term “evangelical”: the root of *euangelizesthai*, to “bring good news,” is *angelos*, “messenger,” or angel. I’m also thinking here of Benjamin’s remarks on the simultaneous movement and stasis of Klee’s *Angelus Novus* (Benjamin, Walter. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn and edited by Hannah Arendt, Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 253-264).

Works Cited

Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. Translated by Chris Turner, Verso, 2010.

Coming 'Round the Mountain. Directed by Levi Jackson. Single Channel Video, 2018, Modern West Gallery, Salt Lake City, UT.

Levi Jackson uses an interdisciplinary approach in his work, combining photography and installation with nods to performance. He challenges historical perceptions of the western landscape, where he was raised and currently resides, by pairing it with contemporary understanding. Levi received his MFA from Pratt Institute (2013) and teaches art and art criticism at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah. He has shown work nationally and internationally with a solo exhibition at the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art (2015) and group exhibitions at Kunsthalle Osnabrück (2017) and Gerish Stiftung Foundation (2015) in Germany. He is represented by Modern West Fine Art in Salt Lake City, Utah. Email: levijackson@weber.edu.