IMAGERY VS. REALITY IN THE PERCEPTION OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Dana RUS[1]

Abstract

Ideology plays an essential role in the cultural formation of American identity. The ideology of the American Dream, which is the foundation of the American identity, is a historically and culturally explained paradigm which, due to the lack of concrete physical reference and to the extreme subjectivity that it entails, has favored the emergence of theories regarding the illusionary aspect of the cultural image of the country. The paper approaches some such theories, including Baudrillard's famous "loss of the real" theory regarding the American cultural space.

Keywords: American exceptionalism, identity, simulacrum, reality.

Being a nation whose members explain their belonging by means of voluntary adhesion to an ideology, America, as the culture which facilitated this singular perspective, becomes identifiable with the traits that this ideology embodies. Principles of the American dream, the belief in a special destiny, the qualities fostered by the frontier spirit – they all combine to result in a unique outlook on life, on society, on the individual's place in relation with the others and with oneself.

Peopled by a nation who assumes the label of exceptionalism motivated by its ideological definition of identity, by the peculiar conditions which assisted its birth, by the religiously motivated belief in the divine mission entrusted to it, the country acquires the traits that the people who identify with it claim for themselves. For people living both within the country and beyond its geographical boundaries, America has come to represent the image that the nation has built for itself. The mythology of the American experience has transgressed the locus of its representation for people and it has been extended to create a spiritual image of the country.

The way people internalize and assimilate myths varies greatly from one individual to another and from one epoch to another, which does not lead to a homogenous version of the American spirit. Moreover, all the enduring American values are conditioned by ineluctable, permanent and realistic facts: by different historical periods, race, sex, social level, economic level, education, ethnic background, cultural perspective. These elements inevitably shape the way individuals choose to assert their belonging to the American nation and, consequently, their image of the country. The result is a collage of different versions of Americanisms which, while mirroring the individual referents, is still a constructed image. This comes in opposition with the traditional image of countries, where belonging is dictated by ascriptive elements: the image is static and given a-priori. In the case of America, the fact that belonging to the country is a fact of voluntary adhesion turns the image into an ever-changing, self-constructing structure. It is also a

[1] Lecturer, PhD, Universitatea „Petru Maior" din Târgu-Mureş

BDD-A2931 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:42:19 UTC)

fluctuant image in the sense that although the basic constituents remain the same, they take on different shapes and perspectives according to the variables they represent.

It appears that the image of the country is composed of a multitude of individual images supplied by mythical representations of the factors which American identity implies. The idea of the country is therefore made up of a multitude of subjectivities which, however homogenous in terms of the original myths lying at the foundation of the American spirit, bear nevertheless resemblance to the personal experiences that individuals are subjected to. Returning to the parallel with the traditional image of countries and state identity based on a given cultural, historical heritage that people belong to due to their ancestry: this image of the country is not to be altered by personal contribution, by subjective input; it finds its stamina from tradition and stability. Conversely, the American image of the country is a subjective product which does start from a commonly shared mythical basis, but which acquires as many shapes as the individuals who create the image.

The consequent result of this mechanism of creating an image of the country is its lack of homogeneity: we do not have one single objective image to which people adhere, but several. Like Peter Conrad asserts, "the reality of America is selective, optional, fantastic: there is an America for each of us" (4). The versatility of the American reality is made possible by the huge permeability of the mythology incorporated by the American spirit, by its flexibility in face of historic challenges and cultural perspectives. The mirror illustrating the million Americas imagined by individuals reflects a reality which is continuously altered according to people's subjective angles of perception.

Although this mechanism of creating an image of the country may find a justification in the argument that reality is what people create for themselves, as the status quo by which they organize their lives, things acquire a more complex aspect when speaking about nations. There are more pragmatic issues which need to be taken into account, and which the American popular culture – the one that people identify with – disregards as irrelevant. If traditionally the image of one's nation is built around real historical events, which acquire mythological dimensions after they happen, due to their power of representation for people for whom they strengthen the sense of belonging to that specific nation, the American way is considerably different. In building their national identity, they start from the premise of the mythical dream as theory, with all the principles that it embodies, and guide their lives according to it. The fact that the American history is full of examples which are in total contradiction with the lofty idea of exceptionalism is of little or no relevance at all. The extermination of the Native Americans, the experience of slavery, the discrimination against women – to mention just the most flagrant instances of historical events which prove American inconsistency in applying the democratic idealism of the exceptional dream – reflect a line of thinking which may be labeled as double standard. Such injustices of history are flaws emerging from the inaccuracies between the individual mechanisms of imagining identity confronted with the historical reality. They are proofs that the application of the

BDD-A2931 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:42:19 UTC)

exceptional dream is fallible, that it is not perfect, but it is perfectible. They also stand as proof to the fact that there is a significant difference between the image that people create for themselves and for the country they live in and the reality as such.

Founding the rationale of a national identity on a dream, however consistent it may be with actual events, and however exceptional it may be considered, is closer to the realms of the imagination rather than to those of reality. A country composed of individuals who build, in a conscious effort, a sense of belonging based on the dream of being exceptionally unique, forms an image which is the sum of the imaginations of these individuals. This is where the gap appears. The state of dreaming is, par excellence, imagining the illusion. The dream of a perfectible version of the self - and, by extrapolation, of the country - inevitably means that this version is not accomplished yet, that it is the goal that we pursue and, at the same time, the promise that it is doable. This creates a significant gap between one's idea of oneself and the objective reality and also a confusion of the two. From the spatial externalization of individuals' convictions of the self emerges a disproportionate sense of reality which is not entirely false, but not entirely true, either.

The America that is formed by this process of imagination is an invention which, while not entirely denying reality, brings it to a state of distortion which at times becomes unrecognizable. This is explained by the fact that the projection of individuals' ideas of their national identity is different from the physical reality. Individuals, as well as nations, may act as embodiments of ideological principles and in virtue of an alleged exceptionalism which they assume as a justification of their deeds and convictions. But this does not automatically confer them the qualities they claim and according to which they justify their existence. There is a gap between the persona individuals choose to embrace and the factual reality. Thinking about the individual and about the country in this principled manner leads to the creation of an invented cultural space, which leads to the simultaneous existence of two distinct entities when speaking about America: one which is the real territory, the physically delimited ground, and another juxtaposed space, which is a discursive invention. This invention relies for its strength on the idealism of the dream, which is also a source of its elusiveness. Being an invention, a product, an artificial creation, the imaginary America is continuously re-imagined, re-invented, re-configured according to the latest interpretations of the principles that lie at the foundation of its creation.

In one of the referential postmodernist approaches to the concept of the real and the imaginary, Jean Baudrillard brings his theoretical interpretation in his famous essay "Simulacra and Simulations" (1992). Even before the appearance of his essay, Baudrillard became to be associated with the idea of "the loss of the real." This concept has to do with the view that in our contemporary society, the tremendous influence of images mediated especially by the media has led to a loss of the distinction between real and imagined, between reality and illusion. The term that Baudrillard uses to describe this state

BDD-A2931 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:42:19 UTC)

of fact is "hyperreality", which implies an erosion of the distinction between these contrasting elements.

Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality and simulacra starts from the premise of a traditional semiotic representation characterizing a past era of "fullness" in which a sign was a surface indication of an underlying reality. He then questions this kind of relation, wondering if a sign is not an index of an underlying reality, but merely of other signs. The system is reconfigured and Baudrillard calls it a *simulacrum*, while the process itself is not one of representation anymore, but one of *simulation*. If, according to Baudrillard, representation "starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent", then simulation "starts from the Utopia of this principle of equivalence." To reach its present state of emptiness, the sign goes through successive phases which Baudrillard defines as:

1. image as a reflection of basic reality
2. image as a mask which perverts a basic reality
3. image which masks the absence of a basic reality
4. image which bears no relation to any reality, being its own pure simulacrum.

In order to exemplify the third stage of the image, Baudrillard resorts to an interpretation of the American relation to reality by giving the example of Disneyland. This sign is apparently one of the second type – a mythologized misrepresentation of the United States: "All of its [America's] values are exalted here, in miniature and comic-strip form. Embalmed and pacified … digest of the American way of life, panegyric to American values, idealized transposition of contradictory reality" (Baudrillard).

However, Baudrillard advances the claim of this specific sign as a third-order simulation, as a sign which conceals an absence: "Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral.) Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real" (ibid). Disneyland has the effect of "concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle" (ibid).

Baudrillard's postmodernist vision on America is founded on the insight that what is normally considered reality is actually just the illusion of it. The loss of the real is a reversal of values which endows utopian imagination with all the prerequisites of a supposedly authentic representation of reality, when it is simply a delusive construction.

The idea of the American space as an intentional construction, with the inherent artificiality that it presupposes, was approached among the first, by Edmundo O'Gorman who, in *The Invention of America* (1961), defines America as an intellectual construct. In terms of the formation of the New World, O'Gorman favors the term 'invention' rather than 'discovery', thus shading new light on Columbus's exploits in the new continent. He differentiates between 'discovery', which implies a previous knowledge of the object and 'invention', whose area of interpretation implies something unheard of and unexpected. 'Discovery', the term generally used when speaking about the way the American continent entered the sphere of European knowledge, "implies that the nature of the thing found

BDD-A2931 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:42:19 UTC)

was previously known to the finder, i.e. that he knows that objects such as the one he has found can and do exist, although the existence of that particular one was wholly unknown." (O'Gorman 10). O'Gorman's theory, based on the writings of Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci and other explorers, argues that they had no previous knowledge or idea about the land they were on the point of finding. Columbus's purpose was to reach Asia, so the theory that he 'discovered' America cannot stand since he did not actually discover anything. He stumbled across a previously unforeseen continent, which was interpreted by the Western world as a discovery. The difference between knowing what to expect from the thing you intentionally pursue - discovery - and imagining it as long as the confinement of your world allows – invention - is significant.

This opens the way to modern cultural theories about America arguing that the country was invented, rather than discovered, as a discursive entity. O'Gorman's concept of "invention" is summed up and explained by Clara Bartocci, who observes that "it was necessary to devise an invention, in a scientific sense, to define that which had never been conceived of in the past"(103). Myra Jehlen further explains the idea of the invention of America as a necessity coming from the fact that such an entity had never been conceived before: "The New World was a future so far from being already imagined, it had to be invented: conquered, settled, and also enjoined, urged, promoted and written into being" (13).

The mechanism of inventing the American space is a provider of infinite interpretations; the opportunities are practically boundless, as the traditional constraints commonly known to the European mind are absent. Time and space acquire new characteristics due to American emptiness: "In American emptiness, there are truths to sustain any fiction" (Conrad 5), they are flexible tools which can be maneuvered in such a way as to serve each individual's imaginative workings.

The historical conditions which assisted and facilitated the idea of the invention of the American space are very important, as they are the key to understanding its mechanism. Inventing the space, contrasted with the classical idea of discovering it, adds a significant imaginative input which brings the image of America closer to the realms of illusion. At the same time, it constitutes an innovation in individuals' way of relating to the world, by completely changing this perspective. The voluntary creation of a new, personal, self-imagined universe, by means of the application of a general set of principles, is a clear mark of modernity. By conferring the individual the liberty to choose the shape of the world he wants to imagine, by the flexibility incorporated in this process, the mechanism of inventing America is a deeply modern one. Peter Conrad observes: "Because America offers an incarnation of your most recondite and specialized fantasies, in discovering America you are discovering yourself. Europe equips you with a hereditary, natal self. America allows you to invent a self better adjusted to the individual you have become since outgrowing the impositions of birth"(5). Similarly, Tzvetan Todorov notes that "the conquest of America heralds and establishes our present identity. Even if every date that permits us to separate any two periods is arbitrary, none is more suitable, in

BDD-A2931 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:42:19 UTC)

order to mark the beginning of the modern era, than the year 1492. We are all direct descendants of Columbus"(5).

The quest of creating an image from the whole country therefore finds a starting point in the individual. He is the depositary of all the ideas that compose the American spirit; the extrapolated image of the country revolves around the multitude of individuals, hence the impression of decentralization. If traditionally conceived national images are focused around important figures from the country's past, American essence is distributed to a multitude of centers in an extremely heterogeneous manner.

The singularity of the American experience consists, we dare assert, in this very peculiar method of creating a national image on a voluntary basis. Consequently, it is the image which is exceptional and infallible, because it rests upon solid principles derived from singular historical circumstances and endowed with powerful mythical power. The historical reality has failed for so many times to keep up with the grandeur and loftiness of the principles that make up American spirit. Myths do not fail, they are constant and rightful and impenetrable. It is the image of the country, as the sum of the individuals' projected images, which is entitled to bear the label of exceptionalism.

Bibliography:

Conrad, Peter. *Imagining America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1980.

Bartocci, Clara. *The American Columbian*. Amsterdam: Mario Materassi, 1996.

Baudrillard, Jean. "Simulacra and Simulations." *Selected Writings*. Ed. Mark Poster. Stanford UP, 1998. 166-184. 2 Oct. 2008 http://www.egs.edu/faculty/baudrillard/baudrillard-simulacra-and-simulations.html.

Jehlen, Myra. "The Literature of the Colonization". *The Cambridge History of American Literature* 1st volume. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

O'Gorman, Edmundo. *The Invention of America: An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of its History*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1961.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Conquest of America*. New York: Harper and Row, 1984.

BDD-A2931 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:42:19 UTC)