BOOK REVIEW


*The Gulf War did not take place* is a collection of three essays that Jean Baudrillard originally wrote for the magazine *Liberation*, during the months of January through March, 1991. They reflect his thoughts through two stages of the war: first, the frantic public political posturing by all parties involved, and, second, the aerial bombardment of Iraq by the United States. In my judgment, his analysis offers an insightful and literally true description of the earlier stage of posturing but a factually and morally flawed understanding of the later stage of bombing.

Baudrillard is known for his work in cultural semiotics. In that field, his analyses show that the power of the signifier is often more compelling than the reality of the signified. This book follows that general trend in his thought, as it moves from a more superficial description of the figuring of a particular reality by the signifier to a deeper analysis of the meaning of the particular signifier.

The more superficial level of Baudrillard’s analysis simply reminds us of the ubiquity and political power of media images. As Baudrillard points out, our access to the war was largely through images; these images were packaged by the powerful in order to tell a particular story; and they were released through a medium that many Americans have come to trust as responsible and impartial. For Americans, and those receiving our broadcasts abroad, the images were the war.

This level of Baudrillard’s analysis corroborates the frustration I and many others felt while watching CNN’s coverage of the Gulf War. As the war threatened to erupt and finally did, its events and possible meanings were laid out for us by the creative and hardworking CNN staff. As the war continued, however, CNN’s coverage deteriorated into the broadcasting of press briefings and file tapes carefully screened by the Pentagon and White House. I found myself amazed that so many people obstinately continued to believe in the reality of these video images despite the possibilities for manipulation through contextualization and direct alteration. And I found myself angered by the dearth of information I had available to interpret the images with, beyond that contributed by my cynicism and general knowledge of politics and history.

The deeper level of Baudrillard’s analysis reveals a particular story told by the images, a story about the triumph of appearance over reality. According to Baudrillard, war, in any conventional or modern sense of the term, was neither the aim nor the outcome of the American action in Iraq. The aim was constructed using the "logic of deterrence" (27) which says, "if I look strong, then no one will tangle with me." The aim of the action, says Baudrillard, was to strengthen the appearance of American power. The American military-political machine chose an adversary much weaker in military capacity and held it hostage, finally exchanging it for the "semblance of victory" (71). In his introduction, translator Paul Patton supports Baudrillard’s analysis by pointing out that nothing has changed in Iraq since the

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war: Saddam has not been removed from power, Iraq and Kuwait have not resolved territorial disputes, the situation of the Iraq’s Kurdish minority has not improved. The real battle, Patton and Baudrillard suggest, was not for any change in Iraqi policy, but for the perpetuation of America’s international image.

Finally, and somewhat implicitly, the two levels of Baudrillard’s analysis come together: the so-called Gulf War was fought both for the sake of image and with image. It was a “virtual war.” The technology was appropriate to the aim.

On the one hand, Baudrillard’s book deepened my understanding of the significance of the television coverage of the war. On the other hand, I find the tone and scope of Baudrillard’s analysis morally objectionable. Baudrillard (at least in this translation) seems annoyed by America’s current preference for “police action” over full-scale military conflict. It is as if he wished this wimpy country would prove itself, i.e., put its money where its mouth is, and leap into all-out war. This unreflective hawkishness shows itself again in Baudrillard’s glossing over the flesh and blood by-products of this “non-war.” True, the Gulf War was not a prolonged full-scale military conflict. But neither did it take place completely on television and on the level of image. The infrastructure in Baghdad and other parts of Iraq were severely damaged. According to Amnesty International reports, tens of thousands of Iraqis died (and, as Ramsey Clark and others say, more continue to die) as a result. The environmental devastation affecting plant, animal and human life was considerable, and the extent of its reach is still unknown. I got a sense of that reach while standing on the top of Hawaii’s Haleakala volcano crater in August 1991, where I could see the cloud of smoke from the burning oil fields making its way around the globe. Finally, reports continue to come in detailing the harmful physiological effects on American soldiers of the intentional or accidental destruction of Iraq’s chemical weapons stores.

Baudrillard is concerned exclusively with the question, "What reality does the image create?" That question is sufficient for those who only have an interest in understanding and perfecting the use of political rhetoric. Baudrillard fails to ask the equally important question, "What reality does the image mask?" Without knowledge of this answer, concrete actions of resistance against that reality are not possible. In the case of the Gulf War, the rhetoric of an easy victory not only creates the illusion of strength. It also masks the price paid in human and animal suffering for that victory. For this reason, I judge Baudrillard’s book to offer an insightful analysis of the political rhetoric of the war, but a too-facile extension of that analysis to the reality of the war. Baudrillard himself has been taken in so strongly by the power of the signifier that he has forgotten to investigate the reality signified.

References:


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