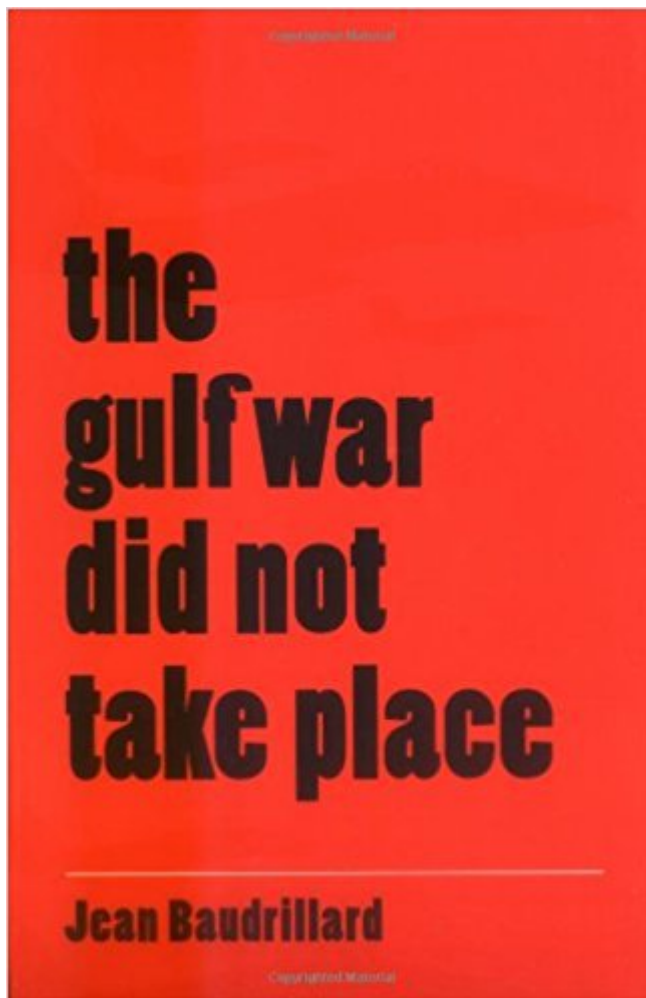




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The Gulf War Did Not Take Place



Synopsis

In a provocative analysis written during the unfolding drama of 1992, Baudrillard draws on his concepts of simulation and the hyperreal to argue that the Gulf War did not take place but was a carefully scripted media event – a "virtual" war. Patton's introduction argues that Baudrillard, more than any other critic of the Gulf War, correctly identified the stakes involved in the gestation of the New World Order.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Text: English (translation) Original Language: French --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The hypothesis of this book is that the deterrence of war in the traditional sense has been internalized and turned back upon the Western powers, producing a form of self-deterrence which renders them incapable of realizing their own power in the form of relations of force. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

For people not used to the way the post-structure French philosophers write, this must feel very confusing. For those of us who are, it is so much worse than that. The argument only feels intellectual, but in reality it can be applied to pretty much any major media event – for those of you who love this book try this thought experiment: change out the words

“Gulf War” with “O.J. Simpson trial” and the only times you will not say more or less the same thing is when Baudrillard is on one of his numerous tangential tirades. If there are any parts that are worth further examination it is the tirades, some of which have sly humor and provoke some thought, but for a book about the First Gulf War to almost wholly ignore the *Casus Bellum* of the conflict--- the inexcusable invasion of Kuwait--- suggests a dark cynicism that more than overshadows any point Baudrillard is trying to make.

I thought this book was largely (but not quite entirely) provocative nonsense. There is some decent sociological analysis in it, but there is also a very large amount of utter drivel. Plainly, the title is intended to shock (and it's a clever reference to Jean Giraudoux's play), but Baudrillard simply fails to make any sort of case to support it. He argues that the war we were presented with on TV and through government propaganda isn't the same as the war as it happened. This is true, but hardly profound or original; "In war, truth is the first casualty" has been attributed to Aeschylus two and a half millennia ago, and although he gives some modern analysis of this, Baudrillard doesn't get far beyond it. The real trouble begins when Baudrillard attempts to describe "reality," because in using the word "reality" to mean "one person's subjective truth" postmodernists like Baudrillard muddle the distinction between fact and interpretation, and sometimes use the muddle dishonestly. For example, Baudrillard laments the lack of a declaration of war, then says "Since it never began, this war is therefore interminable". Now, if he'd said "The lack of a clearly defined declaration makes a clearly defined end very difficult, and the successors to Saddam's regime will have to deal with insurgents for a very long time" he'd have made a good point and been proved right by recent events. But he doesn't do anything of the sort. He claims that the war never began, which is simply not the case. This is simply denying facts, not commenting on perceptions of them. And to use the phrase ".....is therefore interminable" implies some logical imperative which just isn't there. It certainly won't go on for ever, which is a very long time indeed. In another example, he asserts that we TV watchers were submitted to "the same violence" as Saddam's prisoners, tortured into "repenting" in public. I accept a parallel in the distortions of the truth by the two sides, but to maintain that I, as a TV watcher at home, was somehow subjected to "the same violence" as some of Saddam's most brutally abused victims is an obscene thing to say. He's not writing poetry or a novel here. The aim is to give clear insights into an analysis of what is really happening. The words "the same" have a specific meaning here, and it is facts, not interpretation, which are being denied. Let me repeat, some of his political and sociological stuff is actually rather interesting. For

example: "One of the two adversaries is a rug salesman, the other an arms salesman: they have neither the same logic nor the same strategy, even though they are both crooks. There is not enough communication between them to make war upon each other. Saddam will never fight, while the Americans will fight against a fictive double on a screen." It's overstated, of course, but thought-provoking and a pretty good analysis of the two sides' differing approaches to the war. But what *are* we supposed to make of a passage like this, about the video archive which will be studied by future historians of the war: "The archive also belongs to virtual time; it is the complement of the event 'in real time', of that instantaneity of the event and its diffusion. Moreover, rather than the 'revolution' of real time of which Virilio speaks, we should speak of an involution in real time; of an involution of the event in the instantaneity of everything at once, and of its vanishing in information itself. If we take note of the speed of light and the temporal short-circuit of pure war (the nanosecond), we see that this involution precipitates us precisely into the virtuality of war and not into its reality, it precipitates us into the absence of war. Must we denounce the speed of light?" Now, there really are limits, in my view, and this man exceeds all bounds. If he's saying that the video footage isn't the real war, fair enough. It isn't, as Magritte cleverly pointed out. But "the temporal short circuit of pure war (the nanosecond)"? I'm very sorry, but three words, the first and last of which are "oh" and "off" come inexorably to mind. And as for "Must we denounce the speed of light?" - well, words simply fail me. I genuinely cannot remember ever having had to read such abject tosh, and I have studied psychology in my time so it's up against some pretty stiff competition. I'm sorry this is so long. I feel better now, anyway. I've given this two stars because there's the odd interesting idea, but overall I'd recommend giving it a wide berth and reading something - almost anything - else instead.

When the forces of Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, the result was very nearly bloodless. The real blood began to be spilled only during the Occupation. When an international coalition retaliated by striking back, the result may not have been quite as swift or as bloodless, but it was pretty close. While hostilities from both wars were going on, Jean Baudrillard was paying attention in a way that few others must have been doing. To him, both wars were not wars at all, at least not in the traditional Clausewitzian sense. Most societies envisioned war as brutal and bloody, causing much harm to a great many combatants and non-combatants. In the case of the Gulf War, Baudrillard insists that the calculus of war had changed in a fundamental way. The difference lay in the interaction between the media and the opposing armies. Before hostilities had even begun, both sides had run innumerable computer simulations of pertinent variables. By changing one variable,

one outcome emerged. By changing another, a newer outcome resulted. These outcomes looked real and sounded real to those writing the programming. A variable reality was created that could not be distinguished from the eventual real thing. It is this relentless focus on the creation of simulacra that had been the obsession of Baudrillard for nearly twenty years. *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* is a slim volume of three essays that were published over a three month period as separate pieces for a French newspaper *Libération* and a British newspaper *The Guardian*. The original title of each is telling. The first was "The Gulf War Will not Take Place." The second: "The Gulf War is not Really Taking Place." The third: "The Gulf War did not Take Place." All three collectively insist that this war was a phony war, but not to be confused with the German Sitzkrieg in France in 1940. In that war real soldiers simply sat around for months waiting for orders to shoot. In this war, there was real shooting all right. Real people were killed and many buildings were blown up. So how dare Baudrillard defame and dishonor the dead on both sides by calling the "war" no more than a Playstation computer run? His response: there was a "real" war but real in a new sense. From start to finish, from the first shot to the last, the Gulf War was pre-planned right down to a paper clip. Things ran so smoothly that even the Joint Chiefs were amazed. War rarely co-operates by being predictable. But in this case it was. The images of the fighting were sent in real time to America's television sets by CNN. The reality of the fighting precisely coalesced into what Baudrillard termed the simulacra of war. It looked much more savage than it was. From this delving into a war once removed from reality, Baudrillard called it a non-event. Many critics objected, thinking that by "non-event" he meant a hoax. But Baudrillard had a motivation that transcended semantic distinctions. For him, he wished to publicize the Dawn of a New Day, one that had long been in existence but only now paradoxically were the images of a false reality emerging from the shadows of an all too real entrenched apathy. In his earlier books, Baudrillard had described how signs had slowly begun disconnecting from their moorings. The image of a thing now was thought to exist in its own right. The "copy" was now indistinguishable from the "original." The next step would have to be hyper-reality, a mad universe where the inhabitants do not question their existence or their surroundings, nor should they since they are pursuing their lives just as if the hyper-real were truly real. It is this fear that humanity has already come perilously close to this insane world that motivated Baudrillard to write *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*.

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