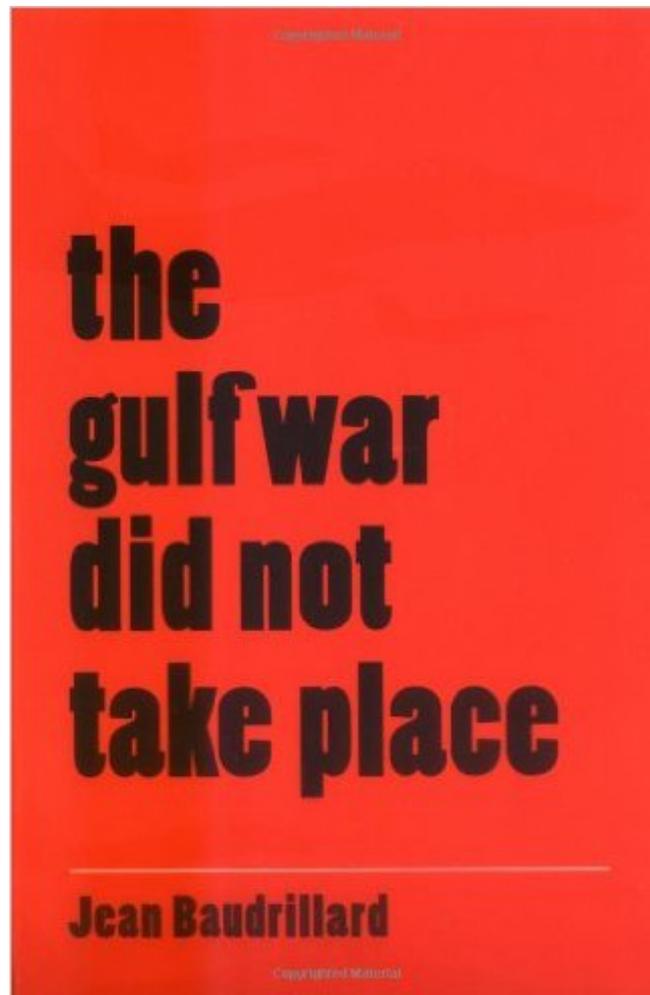


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The Gulf War Did Not Take Place



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

Provocatively titled book either impresses or deeply angers people, I read this years ago and retained only a few points of interest. Yes, the war happened, as in bombs were dropped, people died, buildings were destroyed, many suffered, etc. But it differed markedly from previous wars in that it was mainly an event to be manipulated by different sides in the media. Therefore, it did not take place the way previous wars had, in that the suffering and even a uniform understanding did not penetrate the population at home who watched the events on CNN. Unfortunately, all of this business about the 'realness' of the war, and the simulacra, and the hyper-reality we're now mired in, is written in a frustrating and unnecessarily bloated style that makes even this slim work a slight chore at times. Can certainly be expressed in a simpler way, therefore appearing less profound, but then it wouldn't be the work of French postmodern philosopher. Interesting 'take' on a modern war, with points that would only resonate more in the years since, it's hit-or-miss for most readers of current events (more for the philosophy crowd).

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.

This book basically describes how the first Iraq war differed from traditional wars of the past. It is not for everyone, Baudrillard has the unfortunate position of being too loose with ideas to be taken very seriously by 'real' academics while at the same time writing in a style that is not easily accessible to a popular audience. His thesis is that the 'war' was primarily a media event that was useful in different ways to both sides of the conflict. He does not dispute that violence and suffering took place, but suggests that the event was not a war as was defined in the past by Clausewitz. Any review that states he is trying to 'hide' the essential suffering of those at the ground of the event is just wrong. There is nothing in the book that questions or calls into doubt the experiences of soldiers or civilians; at the same time it does not dwell upon them.

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