

REFLECTIONS ON THE *REALITY* OF THE IRAQ WARS: THE DEMISE OF BAUDRILLARD'S SEARCH FOR TRUTH?

Mitchell Hobbs

The University of Newcastle, Australia

Mitchell.Hobbs@newcastle.edu.au

ABSTRACT

With a military campaign designed to “shock and awe”, on the 20th March, 2003, soldiers from the United States, Britain and Australia launched a war of “pre-emption” against the regime of Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein. Like the first Gulf War, the 2003 invasion of Iraq facilitated a monumental media spectacle, a socio-cultural drama imbued with de-contextualised images, mythic narratives and government ‘spin’. Audiences and circulation figures soared while left and right ideologies battled within the media, as politicians sought a fundamental goal of government, the manufacture of consent.

This paper explores the causal relationship between knowledge of an event, its actual ‘reality’, and the *reality* generated by the news media. It grapples with epistemological questions regarding understanding war in an age where media images shape both our understandings of each other and the world beyond immediate experience. Such questions necessitate a return to the postulations of the controversial, former sociologist, the late Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), whose writings on the Gulf War made him something of an international academic celebrity. Ultimately, this paper seeks to assess Baudrillard’s contribution to understanding the Iraq Wars, reflecting on some of his most important work. Welcome back to “the desert of the real”?

1 INTRODUCTION

On the 20th of March, 2003, a coalition of nations, led by the United States, launched a major military campaign, a war of “pre-emption”, against the regime of the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein. Labelled a “Coalition of the Willing” by the public relations consultants in the employ of the US government, only three nations, the US, the UK and Australia, out of the reported 49 members of this coalition, committed significant military forces to this initial war of “liberation” (see Allan and Zelizer, 2004; Barker, 2003; Kellner, 2005; Wilkie, 2004). Although the governments of these three nations were steadfast in their desire to invade Iraq and dispose of the “evildoer” Hussein, their decision sparked the largest anti-war protests since the turbulent era of the Vietnam War, with some polls reporting as many as 70 per cent of the populations of the UK and Australia being opposed to a unilateral “military action” (see Moore, 2003:70-73). In a manner similar to the propaganda campaigns that accompanied many of the wars of the twentieth century, in the months and days leading up to the conflict governments strove to justify their position, seeking to convince somewhat sceptical populations of the necessity of sending soldiers to a “pre-emptive” war (Rampton and Stauber, 2003; Spencer, 2005).

Politicians from Left and Right spoke with both eloquent conviction and polemical force, debating Iraq’s (supposed) possession of “weapons of mass destruction” and the potential threat that Iraq posed to both its immediate neighbours and to the Western world (the latter via Hussein’s alleged connection with terrorist organisations such as

Al Qaeda - see Kellner, 2005). Public spheres across the world boiled with images of suffering Iraqis, of mushroom clouds, and of the burning towers of the World Trade Centre, as governments sought to harness the news media to muster support or rally dissent. As Michael Bromley (2004) has noted, the media were a battlefield, with the ideologies of Left and Right seeking purchase within the socio-cultural, technological engine that helps to define the world beyond the realm of immediate experience. Both anti-war politicians and the neo-conservative proponents of the invasion were engaged in a battle of image management, of myth making and reinforcing, pursuing one of the fundamental goals of government, the manufacturing of consent (Herman and Chomsky, 1994).

Although the 'Iraq story' has changed significantly since the largely uncritical and triumphalist texts disseminated by the mainstream commercial media in the months immediately preceding and following the invasion (Manne, 2005), the unfolding media drama of early 2003 was merely the second instalment of a story first produced in 1991 (Rampton and Stauber, 2003:173). Entitled the Gulf War, at least by the Anglophone news media, this conflict helped to establish the moral paradigm, and the aesthetic formula, used by the global media in explaining the 2003 Iraq War to audiences, depicting many of the same protagonists and geographical settings, and employing similar cultural codes of good and evil, freedom and liberation (Kellner, 2005). Although the triggers for this earlier conflict were arguably quite different to those that instigated the coalition attacks 12 years later, audiences of the 2003 Iraq War were already familiar with the frames and reportage techniques employed in explaining and defining this event, and tuned in to their televisions (or other news media) with certain *expectations of genre* (analogous to watching a cinematic sequel).

The 2003 Iraq War, or 'Gulf War II', was, then, viewed by audiences not only through the lens of the "embedded" camera operator, but through a cultural paradigm adjusted to the journalistic conventions and styles of the news media. Like the first Gulf War, audiences of 'Gulf War II' saw the conflict unfold much like a Hollywood script, with journalists often drawing upon narratives replete with thematic frames, with stories focussing (at least where possible) on the heroism and strength of allied forces and on the righteousness of the cause (Keeble, 2004). Although not all news media are equal when it comes to questions of veracity, the pervasiveness of such one-dimensional fictions raises (once again) uncomfortable questions regarding the causal relationship between knowledge of an event, its actual 'reality', and the *reality* generated by the news media.

2 DISCUSSION

2.1 MEDIA SPECTACLE AND THE *REALITY* OF WAR

'News', so the seminal work of Stuart Hall (1981:148) has shown, is a human construction, a *product* built out of assumptions regarding the importance of an event via "inferred knowledge about the audience". Media executives are well aware that the spectacle of war is captivating, helping to increase audience ratings and circulation figures, statistics which can then be sold to advertisers. Along the lines of the journalist's adage "if it bleeds, it leads", an editorial formula that has seen stories of violence dominate the news media and has sold newspapers for generations, war is (sadly) good for business. Without becoming side-tracked by debates regarding 'human nature' or our attraction to violence, it is sufficient to note here that more than any other event war facilitates a monumental media spectacle, a techno-cultural explosion of images and expositions resplendent with the dramatic (Kellner, 2005). For news, by necessity, must be more than a mere list of bare facts; it must be interpreted and told in a manner in which the human mind can develop an understanding, building comprehension out of the exchange between socio-cultural stimuli and memory. Likewise, if a news story is presented in a bland or boring manner, then audiences are likely to seek out a competitor with a more engaging product. Such stylistic forces structure the cultural

industries with a certain disposition for the sensational, and, accordingly, pose consequences for what knowledge comes to be engaged within the public sphere. As John Street (2001:37) notes in relation to the first Gulf War:

The mass media do not simply 'cover' observable events and report facts; they animate them by turning them into narratives with plots and actors. Just as they create 'the Gulf War', so they create the political process itself, the context in which the events take place. Movies use the artifice of cinema to tell a story, to create characters in a believable world; news does a similar job for events that are its concern.

In an era where the visual culture of Hollywood is as familiar as the images that colour everyday experience, and where media corporations are comprised of both news and entertainment divisions, further blurring the boundaries of entertainment and information (giving rise to what has been labelled "infotainment" - see Thussu and Freedman, 2003), media spectacles present social repercussions for truth and understanding that go beyond the tragedy of the 'real' conflict. Such repercussions are a primary concern of the work of late controversial French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), whose essays on the first Gulf War collectively constitute a mandatory detour on the road to understanding the representation and *reality* of the ongoing violence in Iraq.

Baudrillard, already a prolific publisher once labelled the "high priest of post-modernity" (Horrocks and Jevtic, 1996:171), became something of an international academic celebrity in 1991 following the publication of three contentious essays entitled: *the Gulf War will not take place* (published just prior to the out break of hostilities); *the Gulf War: is it really taking place?* (published during the conflict); and, *the Gulf War did not take place* (published after the official end of the conflict - see Baudrillard, 1996). As can be seen from Baudrillard's (1996) texts, if one looks past some of his rhetorical claims to the arguments and observations underpinning his assertions, it is clear that he was not denying the occurrence of the conflict, neither the deaths of the combatants nor the civilian casualties, as is commonly assumed. Rather, for Baudrillard the 'Gulf War' was a "simulacrum", a media spectacle fed to hungry audiences culturally geared *a priori* to the use of Hollywood-like scripts dislocated from both the 'actuality' of war and the (semiotic) signifiers ordinarily used in communication. Indeed, as Baudrillard saw it, what has traditionally been thought of as truth, along with the idea of an objective reality, are no longer plausible notions (Baudrillard, 1983; Horrocks and Jevtic, 1996; Kellner, 1995, 2003). Baudrillard believed that the techno-cultural apparatus of the mass media has served to facilitate a new era of social organisation and interaction, a post-modern "hyper-real" world where new technologies saturate culture and consciousness with images and spectacles more intense and vivid than those of the realm of everyday life (Kellner, 2003:320).

Defining the 'world' presented by the news media, such *fetishised* techno-cultural stimuli have served to fuse the virtual with the real, giving rise to a third order of reality (Patton, 1996:11). Thus, audiences of the Gulf War were not presented with the 'reality' of the conflict, which was in the main a one-sided military engagement where a vastly superior United Nations force decimated an inferior enemy, largely technologically incapable of fighting back (Baudrillard, 1996). Audiences were instead given the "nose-cam" footage of "smart bombs", of battlefields cleaned of bodies. Such images gave the impression the violence was "surgical", and helped to produce a technological fantasy of a "clean" conflict (Baudrillard, 1996:40), an entertaining illusion removed from the socio-historic elements and dimensions specifically underpinning the actual event (Baudrillard, 1996:61-64). As the war was devoid of an historic context and largely deprived of critical journalism, one might well argue that the Gulf War (at least for Western audiences), was a spectacular work of military and patriotic fiction; merely propaganda for a more media savvy age. There was no heart of darkness, no horror. Thus, Baudrillard (1996) concluded that "the Gulf War did not take place".

Baudrillard's arguments regarding the first Gulf War, and his later writings on the September 11 terrorist attacks (see Baudrillard, 2003), have been the source of considerable controversy. Indeed, following his death on the 6th March 2007, Rupert Murdoch's national broadsheet newspaper, *The Australian*, ran a large article entitled the *Death of a Clown* (Ramano, 4 April 2007). Written by American academic, Carlin Romano, Baudrillard is accused of being an intellectual fraud; at best an egotistical charlatan:

No one will read Baudrillard in 50 years, once those who made money off his antics fade. As in show business, so in academe. No fraud survives his enablers... If Baudrillard had pulled off the trick of commenting on his own demise, would he have accused himself of suicide, mirroring his repulsive suggestion that the twin towers and their doomed inhabitants committed suicide in a reciprocal gesture to the 9/11 hijackers? Not likely. That would have required the spirit of criticism, which he lacked.

Although the Opinion and Editorial pages of the Murdoch press in Australia are often host to the diatribes of ideologues denouncing the moral and intellectual 'decline' brought about by 'postmodern' academics (Lucy and Mickler, 2006), Romano's words, nonetheless, seem unusually shrill, illustrating well the outrage that Baudrillard's obscure prose inspired in both the general public and fellow scholars. Indeed, following Baudrillard's essays on the first Gulf War, Christopher Norris (1992), in his book *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War*, endeavours to take Baudrillard to task for his "ridiculous" theses, charging him with "ideological complicity", of being an "anti-realist" and of being representative of a class of intellectuals suffering from a "crisis of moral and political nerve". Ironically, however, in seeking to dismiss Baudrillard's argument as mere specious rhetoric, Norris, like many scholars unfamiliar with the antecedents of Baudrillard's thought, adopts a literal, *prima facie*, interpretation of the controversial provocateur's hyperbole, and, thus, cannot see through to the subtext, or rather the logic, driving Baudrillard's words to their polemical extremes.

As has been noted by Barry Smart (2000) (and others), Baudrillard's theorising, which has its roots in neo-Marxism, eventually led him to the proposition that if current sociological critique was incapable of ascertaining truth because reality was being superseded by de-contextualised images (or, rather, signs), then a new system of social inquiry was needed, one capable of breaking out of the endless cycle of simulacra and the intellectual "inertia" brought about by the meta-physical dead end of capitalism. To this end, Baudrillard sought to employ a "fatal strategy" or "fatal theory", where he could highlight the deceptions of "hyper-reality" by pushing them into a "more real than real situation", to force them into a clear "over-existence which is incompatible with that of the real" (Baudrillard cited in Smart, 2000:464). Accordingly, by claiming that the Gulf War did not take place, Baudrillard was seeking to push our thinking of this event beyond the orthodox political economic approach, in order to draw attention to the "simulated" nature of the news media and to the antithetical consequences of this seemingly endless use and reproduction of images and simplistic narratives deprived of socio-historic contexts.

2.2 BRIDGING THE REALITY GULF: FROM BAUDRILLARD TO KELLNER

Although Baudrillard's work on "simulation" and "simulacra" is valuable in highlighting the relationship between the mass media and reality, and, in particular, the ways in which media content (images and narratives) come to be de-contextualised, his theses are *per se* insufficient for the analysis of the contemporary mass media. For instance, as media theorist and researcher Douglas Kellner (2003:31) notes, beyond the level of media spectacle, Baudrillard does not help readers understand events such as the Gulf War, because he reduces the actions of actors and complex political issues to categories of "simulation" and "hyper-reality", in a sense "erasing their concrete determinants".

Kellner, who like Baudrillard, has written extensively on media spectacles, including the Gulf Wars, sees Baudrillard's theory as being "one-dimensional", "privilege[ing] the *form* of media technology over its content, meaning and..use" (Kellner, 1989:73). In this regard, Baudrillard does not account for the political economic dimensions of the news media, nor the cultural practices involved with the production of news (Kellner, 1989:73-74). Thus, he suffers from the same technologically deterministic essentialism that undermined the media theories of Marshall McLuhan, albeit in a different form (Kellner, 1989:73-74). Although Kellner (2003:32) believes that Baudrillard's pre-1990s works on "the consumer society, on the political economy of the sign, simulation and simulacra, and the implosion of [social] phenomenon" are useful and can be deployed within critical social theory, he prefers to read Baudrillard's later, more controversial and obscure, work as "science fiction which anticipates the future by exaggerating present tendencies".

In order to understand war and its relationship with the media in the contemporary era it is, then, necessary to move beyond Baudrillard's *spectacular* theory of media spectacle. For although our culture is resplendent with images, signs and narratives, circulating in a seemingly endless dance of mimicry (or, rather, simulacra), there are observable social institutions and practices producing this semiotic interplay. Although all that is solid might melt into air (Marx and Engles, 2002:223), appearances and illusions are not an end for sociological analysis, but are rather a *seductive* invitation to further social inquiry. As the research of Douglas Kellner (1992; 1995; 2005) has shown, when media spectacles are dissected by critical cultural analysis, re-contextualisation is possible. Images and narratives can be traced back to their sources: whether they lie in Hollywood fantasies or government 'spin'. In short, by assessing the veracity of competing texts, war (as understood by media audiences) can be re-connected to its antecedents and consequences. Indeed, through wrestling with the ideological spectres of myth and narrative, and by searching widely for critically informed explanations of different events, the social sciences can acquire an understanding of the 'truthfulness' of media representations; of the 'authentic' in a realm bewildered by smoke and mirrors. As long as there are competing media voices on which to construct a juxtaposition of 'truths', sociologists can, to a certain extent, force the media to grapple with their own disparate reflections.

3 CONCLUSIONS

3.1 REST IN PEACE BAUDRILLARD?

In the final analysis, then, Baudrillard's work on the Gulf War and the September 11 terrorist attacks should (respectfully) be laid to rest. For although some, such as Richard Keeble (2004:43), have followed Baudrillard in arguing that "there was no war in the gulf in 2003", such statements are somewhat antithetical to the truth aims of the social sciences. Baudrillard, being both an icon and iconoclast, pushed his language and arguments to rhetorical extremes in order to force the collapse of representations and arguments he saw as having supplanted truth. His fatal theory was in a sense intellectual 'hype', for a capricious world in which only 'hype' can be noticed. Yet in shouting his arguments he served to obfuscate their nuance and subtext, the very intellectual essences of his work and, ultimately, his contribution to the body of knowledge.

However, although fatal theory is of little practical use for media researchers seeking an empirically derived 'truth', Baudrillard's *oeuvre* is still (somewhat) instructive, reminding us of the importance of de-mystifying reality. For although the voice of the scholar is that of a pariah in the entertainment driven public sphere, we must force our voices into the public sphere if we are to re-contextualise events such as the Iraq war, by providing audiences with better, more veracious accounts of events. Failing this, we will continue to find our 'defence' forces engaged in military operations under spurious *casus belli* arguments. Accordingly, despite the many faults of his work, Baudrillard should not be forgotten. For although his contribution was more of a slap-of-the-face than a gentle push in the right direction, his ideas regarding simulacra and reality have helped to

further our understanding of media spectacles (and their potential repercussions). In a post-Baudrillard world, as social inquiry (it is to be hoped) returns to a more empirically informed understanding of the media, we should not forget the implications posed by this cultural field. For if sociology seeks to explain the social world, then it must work to prevent the dislocation of *reality* from the 'real' that Baudrillard so feared.

4 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor David Rowe and Dr Ellen Jordan for critiquing an earlier version of this paper.

5 REFERENCES

- Allan, S., & Zelizer, B. (Eds.). (2004). *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Barker, G. (2003). *Sexing It Up*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd.
- Baudrillard, J. (1983). *Simulations* (P. Foss, P. Patton & P. Beitchman, Trans.). New York: Semiotext (e).
- Baudrillard, J. (1996). *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (P. Patton, Trans.). Sydney: Power Publications.
- Baudrillard, J. (2003). *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*. London Verso.
- Bromley, M. (2004). The Battlefield is the Media: War Reporting and the Formation of National Identity in Australia - From Belmont to Baghdad. In S. Allan & B. Zelizer (Eds.), *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime* (pp. 224-243). Oxon: Routledge.
- Hall, S. (1981). A world at one with itself. In S. Cohen & J. Young (Eds.), *The Manufacture of News: Social Problem, Deviance and the Mass Media* (pp. 147-156). Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (1994). *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. London: Vintage.
- Horrocks, C., & Jevtic, Z. (1996). *Baudrillard for Beginners*. Cambridge Icon Books.
- Keeble, R. (2004). Information warfare in an age of hyper-militarism In S. Allan & B. Zelizer (Eds.), *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime* (pp. 43-58). Oxon: Routledge.
- Kellner, D. (1989). *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kellner, D. (1992). *Persian Gulf War TV War*. Oxford: Westview Press.
- Kellner, D. (1995). *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and the Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*. London: Routledge.
- Kellner, D. (2003). Jean Baudrillard. In G. Ritzer (Ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Major Contemporary Social Theorists* (pp. 310-331). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kellner, D. (2005). *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.
- Lucy, N., & Mickler, S. (2006). *The War on Democracy: Conservative Opinion in the Australian Press*. Crawley: University of Western Australia.

- Manne, R. (2005). Murdoch and the War on Iraq. In R. Manne (Ed.), *Do Not Disturb: Is the Media Failing Australia?* (pp. 75-98). Melbourne: Black Inc. Agenda.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2002). *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Moore, M. (2003). *Dude, Where's My Country?* Camberwell: Allen Lane.
- Norris, C. (1992). *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals, and the Gulf War*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Patton, P. (1996). Introduction. In *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (pp. 1-21). Sydney: Power Publications.
- Ramano, C. (4 April 2007). The Death of a Clown. *The Australian* Retrieved 15 August 2007, from <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,21499039-12332,00.html>
- Rampton, S., & Stauber, J. (2003). *Weapons of Mass Deception: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War on Iraq*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Smart, B. (2000). Postmodern Social Theory. In B. S. Turner (Ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory* (2nd ed., pp. 47-480). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Spencer, G. (2005). *The Media and Peace: From Vietnam to the 'War on Terror'*.
- Street, J. (2001). *Mass Media, Politics and Democracy*. New York: Palgrave
- Thussu, D., & Freedman, D. (Eds.). (2003). *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7*. London: Sage.
- Wilkie, A. (2004). *Axis of Deceit*. Melbourne: Black Inc.