

# Stanley Raffel (2004) 'Baudrillard on Simulations: An Exegesis and a Critique'

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## Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explain, apply, and ultimately to point to certain limitations of, Baudrillard's idea that ours is the age of simulations. As the concept has not always been clearly discussed in the literature, early sections of the paper are devoted to describing the notion and providing some specific examples. How Baudrillard can claim that the age of simulations represents a new, qualitatively distinct, stage of society is also examined. Having articulated the basic idea, the paper goes on to try to show its power by utilizing it to analyze a typical contemporary phenomenon, Starbucks. Thus far the paper's main aim has been to argue that simulation is indeed an illuminating concept. However, we next point to a serious dilemma which is certainly not resolved by Baudrillard himself. This problem is the fact that he leaves us, apparently, with no ability to ever see through simulations. In response to this difficulty, the final sections of this article try to show how it is actually possible to accept Baudrillard's basic insight as to the existence and spread of simulations but also possess resources to detect them, thus resisting Baudrillard's pessimistic conclusion that there is no viable alternative to either living in or producing a world of simulated things. In this section of the paper, a major additional focus is Baudrillard's analysis of the first Gulf War.

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**Keywords: Baudrillard; Disney; Gulf War; Signs; Simulation; Starbucks; The Real**

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1.1 This paper has a modest aim, the explication and evaluation of the concept of simulation as developed by Baudrillard. The warrant for this task is that, arguably, other commentators have not managed to characterize, with sufficient clarity, what Baudrillard means by a simulation. Kellner and Norris can serve as examples.

1.2 Though Kellner has written a thoughtful book, illuminating many aspects of Baudrillard's work including his relationship to Marxist theory and his stance on significant contemporary social and political issues, it cannot be said that Kellner's discussion of simulation is up to his usual standard. In his attempt to depict 'Baudrillard's vision of the society of simulations' (Kellner, 1989:82) he refers to the following passage in which Baudrillard is discussing a place where simulations are clearly present, Disneyland, and also suggesting a comparison between the case of this theme park and what he makes of the rest of America:

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America, which *is* Disneyland...Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of...simulation. (Baudrillard, 1988: 172 his italics)

1.3 Kellner proceeds to interpret what Baudrillard is saying here as follows: ...models of the United States in Disneyland appear more real than their instantiations in the social world...( Kellner, 1989:82) Kellner is certainly right to suggest that Disneyland has models or, in other words, simulations, including simulations of aspects of the United States. For example, Frontier Land is a model -- a simulation-- of the Old West. But, if Baudrillard is really saying what Kellner claims, namely that a simulation as obvious as a pretend cowboy in a Frontier Land saloon seems more real than what we find in the actual city of Los Angeles, it is surely difficult to see what Baudrillard could possibly mean. How is there *more* apparent reality in an environment as artificial as Disneyland than is present in the rest of America? But is Kellner's version of Baudrillard accurate?

1.4 Examining what Baudrillard actually says, he is clearly not claiming that Disneyland appears *more* real than the rest of America. He is saying that, though we might think that only Disneyland has simulations, in fact there are simulations elsewhere too, though these simulations are not so obviously unreal ('imaginary') as the ones in Disneyland. In fact, then, Kellner gets it backwards. Baudrillard is saying that the simulations outside Disneyland appear *more* real, his point being that therefore they are harder to detect.

1.5 But Kellner's misinterpretation aside, the main issue is what exactly Baudrillard can mean by stating that America (or anywhere) only appears real because it is a simulation. Below, I will return to the Disneyland case as part of my attempt to try to explain this argument and Baudrillard's idea as a whole.

1.6 But first it is worth noting that even such an astute commentator as Norris never manages a really clear version of what a simulation is. As Norris interprets Baudrillard: ...we now inhabit a realm of purely fictive or illusory appearances;...that 'reality' is nowadays defined through and through by the play of multiplied 'simulacra' or reality-effects...(Norris, 1992:14)

1.7 It does begin to be right to suggest that a simulation is an 'illusory appearance' that manages a 'reality effect' but Norris is not clear on what sorts of 'illusory appearances' are simulations or what 'reality effects' are and how they achieve the distinctive result that Baudrillard calls a simulation. Norris appears to think any reality effect is a simulation: Baudrillard's writings have been applied to a range of trivial phenomena like Disneyland, TV commercials, soap operas, phone-in chat shows and so forth...( Norris 1992: 22)

1.8 These examples are too much of a ragbag to be illuminating. Yes, as we have already acknowledged, Disneyland has what could be called illusory appearances: fake cowboys, pretend elephants, models of Peter Pan, etc. But the other cases, even though they could all be classed as, in a sense, unreal do not necessarily exemplify the distinctive kind of unreality the simulation idea is meant to flag. Taking each case in turn, TV commercials can depart from the real by being totally dishonest or manipulative or exaggerations of the truth. But, as we shall see, none of these terms suggests the particular form of unreality that makes for a simulation. Turning to soap operas, they lack the element, critical to a simulation, of wanting to appear real. They or at least some of them (East Enders) are more attempts at the traditional literary style called realism than simulations. It is noteworthy that, as far as I know, it is not Baudrillard himself but another of his interpreters who even considers soap operas as a suitable example.<sup>[1]</sup> Concerning chat shows, one problem is that it is not really clear that most phone-ins actually are fictive appearances. It would seem better to limit this category to those where hidden stage management comes to light, e. g. where callers of one political persuasion are put through more easily. And even when such manipulation is discovered, the deception is still not exactly, as we shall see, the specific sort of reality effect that constitutes a simulation.<sup>[2]</sup>

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2.1 Beginning afresh, then, what does Baudrillard mean by a simulation? He writes: To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't (Baudrillard, 1988: 167)

2.2 When there is a simulation, then, something is apparently present without it really being there. But how can one ever manage this? When could we not detect the actual absence of what is really absent? And how would one ever manage to make a thing appear to be there when it is not? He says, in a simulation there is: ...substituting signs of the real for the real.... (Baudrillard, 1988:167)

2.3 Careful attention to this enigmatic passage is, I believe, essential to illuminating the concept of simulation. We could think some thing is there because there are *signs* of it and yet it could still not be there and so be a simulation whenever the signs of that thing could be present without the actual thing being present. An example may begin to clarify this possibility. Perhaps the most obvious contemporary case of simulations would be the sub-set of computer games that simulate some real activity. An example would be a computer simulation of golf. Of course when we play on the computer we are not really playing golf and yet the game does manage to simulate golf. It does so just as Baudrillard says, by substituting signs of the real for the real. Thus a white circular design on the screen is the sign of golf ball that is substituted for a real ball, a green area substitutes for a fairway, a stick like line with a wedge shape on the end of it substitutes for a club, etc. Even this simple example does begin to let us see both how it is possible for a real thing, here golf, to be simulated and also how that is basically a matter of substituting sufficient signs for the real presence of the thing.

2.4 But, if it does begin to capture what is meant by a simulation, a weakness of this first type of example is that its 'signs of the real' do not seem at all real. For an example of at least somewhat more realistic simulation, we can return to one of Baudrillard's own favourite examples, Disneyland. However, unlike other commentators and, for that matter Baudrillard himself, even at the risk of stating the obvious, I shall try to specify exactly *how* Disney does a simulation. For example, how does he simulate a pirate? As the cited Baudrillard passage would suggest, the key is to produce sufficient signs of the thing, pirate, to give us the sensation that a pirate is there. Examples of such signs would be an eye patch, a parrot on the shoulder, a peg leg, a bottle of rum. Signs of a pirate are there without, needless to say, a real pirate being there, and that is how a simulation of a pirate gets produced.

2.5 But, as we noted above, Baudrillard wants to say that simulations exist, not just on our computers and in fantasy environments, but in everyday contemporary social life. The cases here are less self-evident but, as we shall see, the same basic idea of sign substitution is what he has in mind. Recalling the passage I suggested Kellner got wrong, Baudrillard is saying that simulation is not confined to Disneyland though the ones outside Disneyland are not quite so obvious. As a start, a typical post-modern shopping mall, whether in Los Angeles or elsewhere in the West, would be likely to provide many cases of what he would call simulations. For example Edinburgh's contemporary development Waverly Market used to include a 'traditional' butcher shop. The simulation is less obvious than a computer game or Disney figure because one could actually buy and even eat the meat but Baudrillard would still have called it a simulation. This is because he would notice various signs of a traditional butcher shop substituting for a real, i.e. truly old, shop, e.g. sawdust on the floor, meat hanging from large hooks, butchers in straw hats.

2.6 As another case, consider the general phenomenon of luxury. Many contemporary housing developments could be analyzed as in the business of simulating this. To do so, they would need to substitute signs of luxury, e.g. fake gold taps in the bathroom, choice of 'Georgian,' 'Regency,' or 'Victorian' front door, etc. These signs would be simulating luxury, the purpose being to convince consumers that another real thing, now not pirate, old-fashioned butcher, or golf game but luxury is actually there when really it is not.

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3.1 If we now have a better grasp of what simulations are, the next question is how Baudrillard utilizes his idea. Like Marx, he offers a story of qualitatively distinct eras, each characterized by a different mode of production. It is also the case that the first two eras are the ones already identified by Marx, feudalism and capitalism. (Baudrillard, 1988: 135) The way Baudrillard theorizes these two eras is by pointing to the difference that mass-production makes to the nature of goods and also to the sort of problems that society will face. Regarding the feudal era, the craft form of production means, to Baudrillard, that society lacks the ability to make many copies of any of its products. Made things were hence either originals, different from one another, every pair of boots or jumper distinct, or, alternatively, in some realms of production, a limited number of copies of some original might be produced. The problem of this era, and Marx would not disagree, <sup>[3]</sup> was scarcity, the constraints of feudal or craft production techniques being such that not much can be produced. It is a constant struggle to produce a sufficient quantity of goods. There is certainly no question of a surplus.

3.2 But feudalism, limited productivity, the era of many unreproducible originals gives way to capitalism: ...production is the dominant theme of the industrial era. (Baudrillard, 1989: 135)

3.3 This is the era of mass reproduction. Baudrillard also calls it a time of 'indefinite reproducibility.' (Baudrillard, 1989: 138) In capitalism we reach the stage where as many examples of a car, a washing machine, a tin of baked beans, can be produced as we could ever wish. Society reaches new, hitherto unimaginable, levels of productivity. <sup>[4]</sup> Feudalism's big problem, the scarcity of goods, has, at least in principle, been overcome. <sup>[5]</sup> However, this era too had its distinctive problems, ones often noticed by sociologists and other cultural critics, particularly in the 1950's. <sup>[6]</sup> The problems mass-production has been associated with are excessive uniformity, the phenomenon of 'conformity,' everyone craving the same mass-produced goods and, also, a certain very noticeable and perhaps inevitable reduction in quality, the price that had to be paid for mass-production techniques.

3.4 It has to be said that all this is quite standard sociological argument. What makes Baudrillard distinctive is his suggestion that these sorts of products and the problems associated with them have now been superseded because we have moved into a third, qualitatively distinct, stage. He wants us to see that it is no longer really accurate to say that current production techniques are watering down some original by mass-producing it nor, as a consequence, that what is wrong with current goods is that they are inferior specimens or too uniform. Baudrillard thinks there has been another equally significant revolution such that we are not producing, or even mass-producing, some original thing any more: ...simulation is the dominant scheme of the present phase of history.... (Baudrillard, 1989: 135)

3.5 What might he mean? Going back to our initial examples, a golf computer game and a Disney pirate, it would be Baudrillard's point that neither of these is actually a reproduction, i.e. an additional example of golf or a pirate. The persons who made these have not exactly made many games of golf or many pirates. Rather, they are more *pretending* to make golf or pirates, or to put it another way, making pretend golf or pretend pirates. They pretend to create golf or pirates where really there are no such things. Baudrillard wants to say, then, that nowadays it is not so much production, even in the form of mass-production, that is reigning. It is actually pretending to produce things, producing not things but the illusion of things. And if he is right, one key consequence is that the problem, both for society and sociologists, would no longer be

too much sameness or loss of quality. Now the problem is that we are all utterly confused: we think we have X, Y, and Z but really all we have is the illusion of them.

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4.1 If Baudrillard's thesis that there are distinct modes of production that are dominant in each era and that ours is the era of simulation is to be useful, it should enable us to highlight emerging trends. In this section, I shall try to show that one current phenomenon that does fit with his thesis is the rise of Starbucks. If, as seems reasonable, Starbucks rather than MacDonalds is the more typical icon of our era, then Baudrillard's idea can be used to understand this because Starbucks is, I shall argue, better seen as a simulation rather than a mass-production. Obviously MacDonalds is mass-producing the hamburger (Ritzer, 1998, 2000). Now, though Ritzer does try to fit Starbucks into this same mass-production mode, it is noteworthy that he struggles because it is a somewhat anomalous case. For example, as he admits, unlike Macdonalds' hamburgers, whatever is problematic about Starbucks does not seem to be the poor quality of the actual coffee. Nor does it have either the particularly low prices or the especially rapid service that Ritzer expects for examples of the 'MacDonaldization thesis.' (Ritzer, 2000: 178-80)

4.2 What Ritzer misses is that, unlike MacDonalds, Starbucks is not so much in the business of mass-producing something as of simulating something. That is, it is not so much creating many copies of a thing as producing sufficient signs to attempt to convince us we are in the presence of something that is not really there. One way to develop this point is in terms of Starbucks' history. As is well known, Starbucks was only developed into what it is today from its origin as a store in Seattle that sold coffee beans for home use after the person responsible for this transformation had visited Milan, noticed the prevalence of Milanese cafes, and sensed a market gap in the United States and, eventually, in additional countries in the West. Now, if we think of a typical Milanese café as his original, the question is what is the relation between what we now know as Starbucks and this original. Obviously, Starbucks is no meticulous recreation of one particular café in Milan as Baudrillard would say used to characterize the era of craftsmanship. But nor is Starbucks exactly a case of mass-producing an original in the way we can safely say that MacDonalds has mass-produced the hamburger, since Starbucks leaves out so many aspects of what anyone who has ever been to one would know as typical of the original, e. g. elegant décor, bar format serving alcohol as well as coffee, clientele mostly made up of neighbourhood locals. At the same time, what we do get is various signs, e. g. use of Italian espresso machines, coffee choices and sizes given Italian names, presence of, if not all the attributes of (see below), baristas, the fact that the coffee is better than most standard American coffee. All of these could be designed to signify, at least to the naïve, Milanese café.

4.3 This is not to argue that Starbucks is better or worse than MacDonalds or any less a creature of capitalism but it is to insist that there is a difference between them.

4.4 We suggest that it is precisely the difference between mass-production and simulation that Baudrillard has managed to alert us to. Whatever the weaknesses of MacDonalds, we can say that it is not a fake. It does not exactly pretend to be fine dining or pretend to be a local neighbourhood institution. Nor does it even pretend to be fast. We can concede that it is fast. Or even pretend to be cheap. It is.

4.5 Starbucks, on the other hand, pretends not to be fast food, pretends not to be just another mass-produced commodity. It does so by producing signs that could suggest commitment to a convivial local culture, an aesthetically pleasing life style, an ambiance conducive to Italian-style sociability. It gives superficial signs of such commitments, notably by giving us Italian-style coffee and letting us congregate there (so long as we can afford it). It does seem, then, an example of Baudrillard's new era of simulation, an era where we can lose our grip on reality, where we can be led to believe continental café life has finally arrived at our doorstep, but where the more accurate conclusion is that what has arrived is better seen just as a self-serving illusion created by a clever corporation.

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5.1 The consideration of Starbucks does begin to suggest that Baudrillard has produced a compelling thesis and one that offers a potentially telling critique of some contemporary goods but that is not to say his work is beyond criticism. A key difficulty with Baudrillard's idea is one that Norris has pointed to. While Baudrillard has alerted us to the prevalence of simulations, he also concludes that we are fated to just accept this emerging world because we are bereft of any way of challenging the validity of the signs. As Norris puts it, according to Baudrillard: ...there will be nobody in a position to know that what they are seeing, reading, or hearing is not some fictive simulacrum of the real. (Norris, 1992: 12)

5.2 And this leaves all of us, members of society, sociologists, fated to 'a phase of terminal indifference' (Norris, 1992: 13) because it seems that a world of simulations creates the dilemma that: ...there is no

point criticising 'false' appearances (whether on epistemological or socio-political grounds) since those appearances are all that we have...(Norris, 1992: 14-15)

5.3 But, as we try to develop here, it is actually possible to accept the philosophical point that all we have are appearances or signs without going on to conclude that there is no work we can ever do which will even bear on the question of whether or to what extent, we may be dealing with a simulation. It can be accepted that all signs are ambiguous and that therefore certainty of interpretation is not possible, without giving up on the search for at least more rather than less reliable signs of whatever we are seeking to determine as possibly present. [7]

5.4 As a start on how we might look for, not certainty, but more rather than less reliable signs of what a product is, we can explore a neglected passage where Baudrillard himself comments on the relation between simulations and the real. He writes that a simulation: ...provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have to be produced. (Baudrillard, 1989: 167)

5.5 This passage is interesting both because it does confirm Norris' worry that Baudrillard seems to have given up on the need for reality, but also because it is one of the few places where he suggests what is so potentially attractive about simulations. The implication is that there is something very convenient about simulations. Producing them is easier than producing 'the real' because anything real depends on 'vicissitudes.'

5.6 To clarify what he means, I shall further develop the Starbucks example. Even a cursory knowledge of the subject suggests that the product or achievement properly identified as a Milanese bar could never have been produced or sustained were it not for various vicissitudes, i.e. contingencies, that have helped make both the origin and the endurance of this thing possible. [8] One such contingency can be summarized as the place called Milan because it has provided and provides various elements which, if not necessary, are at least conducive to this achievement. For example it is a (contingent) fact that Milan is a place that nurtures both modern industrial techniques and aesthetic design and that at least partly accounts for the fact that the espresso machine (which is both an industrial artefact and a design feat) happened to be invented there. More obviously, the chic quality of at least many examples of these bars is reflective of the (contingent) fact that central Milan as a whole is that sort of fashionable, design conscious place. And even more obviously, the (contingent) fact that Milan and for that matter Italy as a whole is a place where, unlike either Britain or the U. S., it was not thought necessary or desirable to provide separate environments for coffee and alcohol consumption, contributes to both the origin and continuing endurance of Milanese style bars which, as we said, offer both alcohol and coffee, sometimes in the same cup.

5.7 Besides the influence of place, another vicissitude that this achievement undoubtedly required and requires can be summarized as the contribution of the actual people who are producing the product. Without the skill and even theatrical flair of the baristas (a spectacle often worth the price of admission) or the sheer hard work, long hours and other sacrifices of owners and employees (in smaller establishments sometimes the same people), obviously it would not be possible for these sorts of bars either to have been developed or sustained.

5.8 Finally, we can note the vicissitude of whether there are sufficient discerning others to make this product viable. One could manage to produce wonderful espresso in an elegant setting but there still remains the contingency, apparently not a problem in Milan, of whether there are a sufficient number of other people who are willing and able to support one's venture in the practical form of becoming 'regulars.'

5.9 Now it is true that Starbucks has 'short-circuited' all three of these vicissitudes. Clearly it has no need for its shops to be in Milan. The only fully committed staff it needs are at the corporate level and it has developed practices that make it unnecessary to depend on skilled and colourful baristas. Nor does it actually require either many regular or particularly discerning customers.

5.10 But to jump from the undeniable fact that Starbucks is possible and even, in a sense, successful to Baudrillard's extreme conclusion that 'never again will the real have to be produced' or to his general position underlying such conclusions (and criticized by Norris) that there are no possible methods for detecting that simulations are simulations, requires more than just that Starbucks be able to manage some signs of the real. It also requires that we could seriously maintain that that are *no detectable signs that the short-circuiting of the vicissitudes has visibly changed or damaged the product.*

5.11 But one does not need to be anything like a purist to be able to point to *many* clear-cut signs of such change and damage, even serious damage. Indeed and, as we have already implied, just casual observation reveals both that Starbucks and a typical Milanese Bar are substantially different and, crucially, that these differences can almost certainly be attributed to the sort of compromises one is compelled to make as one seeks to ignore or overcome the three vicissitudes we have just been discussing.

5.12 In terms of place, i.e. because of not being in Milan, while Starbucks has been able to overcome the most obvious drawback of location simply by importing authentic Italian espresso machines, and has also been free to adopt Italian names for its drinks, other features, e. g. its anodyne décor, its absence of alcohol, its feeble pastry selection, are all quite clear signs that it is not *that* easy to produce a Milanese bar if one does not happen to be placed in the supportive environment for that product that is Milan. Second, the substitution of anonymous staff for the rarer qualities of the traditional barista, while it does mean that it will not be hard to find staff for ever wider expansion, also probably explains an additional glaring difference in the two products. Whereas in Milanese bars one can stand at the bar watching the barista perform and/or exchange banter with him, in Starbucks, presumably because there is no such spectacle to watch or anything to say to the barista, the seating tends to be arranged so that, instead of standing at the bar (in fact there is no bar), solo customers are forced to stare out the window. Third, while it is true that Starbucks has managed to dispense with the need for discerning regular locals, it can hardly be argued that the overcoming of this vicissitude does not show. For example, it shows in the fact that Starbucks, unlike its Milanese 'equivalent,' does not really manage to be the sort of place where one can spontaneously drop in half expecting to meet other regulars for chat, cards, news etc. Instead, it tends to be populated either by people who have arranged to meet there or by solo strangers who are mostly intent on keeping one another at a distance. Also, the absence of discerning loyal regulars shows in Starbucks' apparent constant need to expand its offerings to include ever more un-Italian items or in its need to pander to the consumerist mentality by its enthusiastic endorsement of take-out trade, take-out being quite alien to the authentic Milanese idea in part because the most popular drink, espresso, is normally meant to be quickly drunk in situ.

5.13 What are the implications for Baudrillard's general argument of our consideration of this specific case? I do not suggest he is wrong to point to simulations as a problem of our time. Indeed, the analysis of Starbucks actually helps to explain why simulations might be such a prevalent feature of our era. They are a tempting tactic for would-be producers because, as we saw, in at least three ways, they make the act of production less problematic. Simulations are not so dependent on producers happening to be in a place that facilitates production of the product in question. Nor is there the need either for sufficient persons with the commitments and talents the product requires, or the presence of enough others with sufficient discernment or loyalty to appreciate and otherwise support the product.

5.14 All these possible advantages of simulations do need to be conceded and there is also the further advantage that it is probably inherent in the idea of at least decent simulations that most persons will not easily realize they are being fooled. Since the product will have 'signs of the real,' it is certainly possible that a simulation will not be seen as such. But, while accepting that simulations are a significant feature of our times, still the analysis of Starbucks' failings suggests that Baudrillard goes much too far when he claims that 'never again will the real have to be produced' or that simulations provide '*all* the signs of the real.' (my italics) Simulations may be tempting and convincing but, as I have tried to show, this one also has its costs, namely visible or otherwise tangible damage to the product. In that it is possible to detect this damage because simulation leaves signs of *it*, it seems wrong for Baudrillard to claim that there will never again be the need to engage in any other form of production than simulating things.

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6.1 So, even as it has been suggested that Baudrillard's concept is a useful tool for analyzing contemporary society, two main criticisms have also been made: 1. It is an exaggeration to prophesize that the real will *never* again have to be produced. 2. While it can be difficult, it is *not* impossible to detect signs that a product is being simulated. The second criticism has the important implication that, contrary to Norris's worry about Baudrillard, it can be possible to utilize the notion of simulation to *discover* false appearances. In this section, both these criticisms will be further developed, using Baudrillard's own most well known, indeed notorious, example of a simulation, the first Gulf War. At the same time, I shall also use the Gulf War case to further confirm, thought in moderated form, Baudrillard's own point as to the prevalence of simulations.

6.2 Surely the most extreme version of Baudrillard's thesis of the rise of simulations was his prediction, made on the eve of the war, that it simply would not happen: War has entered into a definitive crisis. It is too late for the (hot) WW III: This has already taken place, distilled down the years into the Cold War. There will be no other...deterrence has not come to an end...Today it functions as self-deterrence...the profound self-deterrence of American power...paralyzed by its own strength and incapable of assuming it in the form of relations of force. This is why the Gulf War will not take place. (Baudrillard, 1995a: 24-25)

6.2 He is saying or, better, predicting that the arrival of the fleet and troops, the rewing up of the bombers, the war-like rhetoric and so on would be sufficient to substitute for the real thing. Just as there can be signs of a Milanese coffee bar, there can also be signs of war, e. g. ships steaming toward the Gulf and his claim

is that in both cases the signs will make the real thing unnecessary.

6.4 That Baudrillard was actually making a prediction when he wrote this is confirmed by his postscript: PS To demonstrate the impossibility of war just at the moment when it must take place, when the signs of its occurrence are accumulating, is a stupid gamble. But it would have been even more stupid not to seize the opportunity. (Baudrillard, 1995a: 28)

6.5 The opportunity he has in mind must be the possibility his prediction will prove right in which case his claim that simulations have been replacing the real would certainly have been vindicated in dramatic fashion. However, surely he has lost *this* bet. If by simulation he meant, as he clearly did when he wrote this piece, deterrent show of force, his prediction that it would seem sufficient to substitute for anything more real has just not been born out by events. And the upshot, even though Baudrillard himself never acknowledges this, is that the extreme version of the simulation thesis in which there would never again be a need for anything real, in this case real fighting or real death, now appears as a (stupid?) mistake.

6.6 It is tempting to go further and conclude that the whole idea has lost any analytic force but such a conclusion is premature. We need to examine Baudrillard's attempts to defend the thesis, albeit in modified form, in the two additional pieces he wrote, one during the war, the other after it. First, then, how does he try to argue that the Gulf War is not taking place, i. e. is still a simulation, even as the war has, he does not deny, started? In a piece written during the war, he writes: From a military point of view, to allow this war to endure in the way they have (instead of applying an Israeli solution and immediately exploiting the imbalance of force while short-circuiting all retaliatory effects), is a clumsy solution lacking in glory and full of perverse effects (Saddam's aura among the Arab masses). Nevertheless in doing this, they impose a suspense, a temporal vacuum in which they present to themselves and to the entire world the spectacle of their virtual power. They will have allowed the war to endure as long as it takes, not to win but to persuade the whole world of the infallibility of their machine. (Baudrillard, 1995b: 55)

6.7 What he is undoubtedly referring to here is the prolonged period of air war that preceded the (as it turned out very brief) ground invasion. This does clearly contrast with Israeli tactics of a lightning strike and quick victory in the Six Day War. Certainly, unsympathetic commentators could just dismiss Baudrillard's interpretation of these Gulf events as virtual (a simulation) by pointing out that, after all, the bombing was leading to *real* deaths just as the Israeli use of ground forces did. However, to be fair to Baudrillard, while it would have seemed nonsensical to query whether the Six Day War took place, there actually does seem to be something less real about a war in which, as he says, the transparently superior side is apparently prolonging the war rather than seeking to end it and even not doing what it can to attain victory as quickly as possible. It can be said, with Baudrillard, that it was as if the Americans were not *really* (in the sense of to the best of their ability) fighting. An analogous case would be a boxing match in which one of the fighters was visibly pulling his punches. It can appropriately be said of such a protagonist that he is not really fighting.

6.8 However, there is also the other aspect of the simulation thesis that needs to be tested, namely not just whether simulations do exist but whether they can adequately substitute for the real. Besides the signs that (he would say) are deceiving us into thinking that this is a real war, e. g. the undeniable facts that people are dying, bombs are being dropped and so on, might there also be signs that can help us detect it is less than real? If so, while that does provide some support for his thesis that simulations are prevalent, it does not bear out his other point that they are an adequate substitute for the real thing. Though he does not emphasize it, the key point here is actually noticed by Baudrillard himself. By suggesting that prolonging the war is 'a clumsy solution lacking in glory and full of perverse effects,' *Baudrillard* can be said to have detected signs of how a simulation can lack key properties of the thing it can supposedly substitute for. We may concede his point that the Americans are not really fighting and so a simulation is occurring, but then we should also recognize, as he implicitly does, that the simulation does suffer from certain noteworthy lacks, in particular here a lack of glory. If simulating war, whatever its advantages, results, as *Baudrillard* admits, in a lack of glory, it seems wrong to conclude that simulations are either undetectable or fully adequate substitutes for the real thing.

6.9 But given that there was (eventually) a ground war and a victory, did not even the more subtle form of simulation he claims to have observed during the war finally give way to reality? Not according to Baudrillard because even in the piece written after the war, Baudrillard is still arguing that the whole event was unreal: It is perhaps because the two adversaries did not even confront each other face to face, the one lost in its virtual war won in advance, the other buried in its traditional war lost in advance. They never saw each other: when the Americans finally appeared behind their curtains of bombs the Iraqis had already disappeared behind their curtain of smoke. (Baudrillard, 1995c: 62)

6.10 Here the fact he is interpreting is that, when the ground war did finally start, so many Iraqis had been killed, wounded, or demoralized by the air war that there was only minimal resistance. The Coalition troops

basically rolled into Iraq unopposed.

6.11 This in turn had the effect that there were very few Allied casualties and that most of the Iraqi casualties were of conscripts forced to sit still and endure the air war. Or, as Baudrillard interprets these facts: Even the status of the deaths may be questioned on both sides. The minimal losses of the coalition pose a serious problem, which never arose in any earlier war. The paltry number of deaths may be cause for self-congratulation, but nothing will prevent this figure being paltry. Strangely, a war without victims does not seem like a real war but rather the prefiguration of an experimental, blank war, or a war even more inhuman because it is without human losses. No heroes on the other side either, where death was most often that of sacrificed extras, left as cover in the trenches of Kuwait or civilians serving as bait and martyrs for the dirty war. (Baudrillard, 1995c: 73)

6.12 So he has found ways of saying, even after the war has, to all appearances, occurred in the form of ground fighting, death, and even victory, that it is still a simulation. Again, it is certainly possible to belittle his arguments: is it really the case that only fair fights are wars? Does he expect the coalition to have deliberately sacrificed more of its soldiers in order to convince us that they were really fighting? However, it once again seems fairer to him to admit that a fight that is so one-sided, has such an inevitable outcome, and in which the victors were not forced to spill more blood does *not* seem quite so real a war as one with great battles, indeterminate outcomes, see sawing of fortune, and, yes, considerable losses even from the victorious side. He can reasonably argue then, even in the face of the ground war and the eventual victory, that this war still has elements of being a simulation, of being less than the real thing.

6.13 But concerning this post war analysis as well, there is also the other question: if it is a simulation, is it an adequate substitute for the real? It is noteworthy, in terms of this issue, that Baudrillard himself, assessing the war, calls: 'the general effect...a farce which we will not even have time to applaud.' (Baudrillard, 1995c: 62-3) Also that he states that the 'paltry' death toll does mean there can be no heroes. (Baudrillard, 1995c: 73). What these observations of *his* imply, is in line with the earlier conclusions, both from the consideration of other aspects of Gulf events and the analysis of Starbucks. It is true that a simulation can manage to avoid some of the vicissitudes associated with real productions. For example, the vicissitudes of (real) war surely include not being certain in advance of the outcome and the need to risk untold numbers of one's own soldiers. It is true that the first Gulf War did manage by and large to avoid--short circuit-- these vicissitudes so Baudrillard might be tempted to proclaim again that it shows there is no need for the real. However, such a conclusion would only be possible by ignoring *his own* observation that the simulation could not avoid certain glaring defects. It had the disadvantage of becoming a sort of inferior war, a farce we could not even applaud, without heroes, without any glory.

-7-

7.1 Assuming that the working through of the two examples has been sound, we are led to a conclusion somewhere between those who believe Baudrillard is just the worst (or best) example of post-modern excess and those who are willing to accept his ideas uncritically. It does seem that investigating the possible presence of simulations is a fruitful way to examine some contemporary phenomena and so he deserves praise for developing a stimulating concept. But Baudrillard's own pronouncements in support of the concept are seriously misleading in at least two ways.

- It is an overstatement to claim that from now on all we will ever have or need are simulations.
- Even his own detailed analyses of simulations contradict his pessimistic thesis that they can never be detected.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Poster, 1988:6.

<sup>2</sup> Two additional useful discussions of Baudrillard which, I would argue, also fall short in their depictions of simulation are Poster, 1988, see especially 1, 6 and Gane, 1991, especially 136.

<sup>3</sup> Although he might have objected that other aspects of feudalism such as its capacity for exploitation are not adequately explored by Baudrillard.

<sup>4</sup> This point about capitalism is, of course, emphasized in *The Communist Manifesto*.

<sup>5</sup> Only in principle because of course there are still crises of scarcity, especially in third world countries but these are thought to be caused by problems of distribution rather than problems of production.



<sup>6</sup> See for example Riessman, 1950. Baudrillard himself discusses these problems in some of his earlier writings, for example, Baudrillard, 1989: 35-44.

<sup>7</sup> For a clear depiction of this problem of the ambiguity of signs, see McHugh, 1996: 25-27, 30-34. See also Derrida, 1976.

<sup>8</sup> My discussion in what follows owes a great deal to a paper by McHugh in which the three concepts of 'common place,' 'I,' and 'us' are developed in order to provide a sound basis for analyzing the actions of persons in communities. (McHugh, 2002:17-21)

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