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**Understanding the *GULF WAR*:  
Hyperreality, Postmodernity,  
Spectacle**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## ABSTRACT

In attempting to understand the Persian Gulf War of 1991, various descriptive labels have been employed by commentators - the "postmodern war", the "cyberwar", a war of "hyperreality", and a media "spectacle". Such terms are signals of the high degree to which it was felt that this war was somehow indicative of the new age that late modern society in general has entered. This thesis explores and questions such readings of the Gulf War, and the general social thinking which motivates them.

I introduce the thesis with a chapter in which I aim to clarify just what is meant by the terms used to describe these "new times": postmodernity, the society of the spectacle, hyperreality. From these formulations I want to extract and investigate particular aspects in my next four chapters as they relate to the Gulf War. These themes are: illusion and reality; history and fiction; secrecy; and resistance.

In the Gulf War we seemed to have experienced a blurring of the illusion-reality distinction. In this immensely mediated war, expert speculation, computer and video simulations, and movie-like narratives seemed to become more tangible than, and certainly blurred the impact of, the realities taking place on the ground. My argument on this thematic issue is that while the media-creation of the war is fascinating and important, we are in no way justified in shelving distinctions between illusion and reality, as some postmodernists are inclined to do. On the contrary, critical sociologists must remain committed to "exposing" the illusions - projected by the media and the Coalition leaders - that surrounded the foundations on which the war was legitimised and the conduct of the war itself.

Related to this question is the blurring of the history-fiction divide by some theorists of postmodernity. In attacking the "grand narratives" of modernity and in placing a one-sided emphasis on the textuality of history, postmodernist theorists are, I maintain, left without a defence against the history of the victors. Against these accounts and the collapse of historicity in postmodern culture, I reassert the importance of sociological and historical truth, the historicity of the text, and the inescapable need for totalising, structural theory.

Guy Debord's emphasis on secrecy in his latter theoretical work on the society of the spectacle is particularly relevant to the case of the Gulf War. In the Gulf War we find an attempt, through profound military secrecy, to reorganise the

perception of war on the basis of political expediency. The resulting continuous stream of disinformation released left the events shrouded in mystery. Meanwhile, the spectacle of terrorism worked to legitimise intervention and mobilise support from an increasingly marginalised population.

Finally, I consider the question of resistance. For some, the advancing colonization of all spheres of life by the commodity leaves no "outside" from which to mount opposition in late capitalist society. The smothering of anti-war protest by quasi-fascistic euphoria testifies to the impotence of strategies of hyperconformity and the limited progressiveness of mass culture. At the same time, the wavering and even capitulation of numerous leftist intellectuals reflected the waning of utopian vision - an eclipse frequently encapsulated in such shorthand phrases as the "crisis of Marxism" and "the end of history". I relate the muteness of opposition both to the manipulation entailed by the "society of spectacle" and to the doldrums the left is in at present. The implication of my presentation at this point, and the overall thrust of the thesis is that rather than the hopeful liberalism or ironic cosmopolitanism recommended by postmodernism, only a reconstitution of the revolutionary utopian vision can do justice to the intellectual and political challenges posed by such phenomena as the Gulf War and its re-presentations within Western culture.

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## PREFACE

As the fifth anniversary of the Persian Gulf War of 1991 draws near, its social consequences remain tangible and troubling. The suffering of the Iraqi population continues as the U.S. administration perseveres in doing everything in its power to make Iraq even more uninhabitable. Throughout the region as a whole, the Gulf War has resulted in pollution, massive losses in revenue and generally degraded living conditions, with the prospects for a better, more prosperous and democratic future extremely unlikely. For the entire third world, the collapse of the state capitalist regimes and then a series of extremely aggressive and destructive interventions by the U.S. (the most important being the Gulf War) look like heralding an end to those Leninist models of third world resistance, revolution, and development that have for some decades prevailed.

If the above encapsulates some part of the features and consequences of the Gulf War, it is also important to say that the war contained and reflected a set of "morbid symptoms" of the age we are living through: spectacular, thoroughly mediated "television events"; a diminished or diminishing ability to critically intervene or resist the onward march of late capitalism; an increasing difficulty (due to our experience of fragmentation) or reluctance to speak of truth with regard to historical events and sociological processes; a waning - with this uncertainty - of utopian vision; and a powerful and extensive secrecy in the conduct of international and domestic affairs. And it is these sorts of things, along with other features of this postmodern, hyperreal, spectacular epoch (that we have supposedly reached), that I intend to investigate in this thesis.

In order to do this I bring together Gulf War material with a number of different facets of the debate on postmodernity, hyperreality, and society as spectacle and assess the accuracy, utility, and implications of such notions. The reason for the intense interest in the postmodernity debate is no doubt connected to the extent to which the theorists involved, like Jean Baudrillard, appear to so accurately describe the times in which we live (the fragmentation, the unreality



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and uncertainty, the "obscenity", the apocalyptic mood). On the other hand though, the tendency of all such theorising (poststructuralist and postmodernist) is to devalue, even to trash notions such as truth, enlightenment and liberation and I will be arguing that such theoretical inclinations are neither rationally convincing nor give grounds for social optimism.

Today modernist certainties, ambitious and totalising schemes, and utopian projections appear unsophisticated, even absurd; and yet, events of such profound irrationality and vulgarity as the Gulf War, not to mention the irrationalities of regular late capitalist existence, force us nevertheless to return again to these apparently old-fashioned notions.

The worth of such a thesis is for me ultimately political and it is with such political and moral goals in mind that I try to counter the "ironic cosmopolitanism" and resignation/acquiescence shown in the face of the current order of things, so often characteristic of postmodernist theory. That an event like the Gulf War reveals the importance of such sociological debates is evident in the commitment I feel compelled not to avoid in my writing. While in undertaking this kind of social investigation there can be no clear separation between "fact" and "value", I do believe that such sociological arguments can be decided upon, not only in principle, but often in substance too. It seems to me beyond doubt that we can know a very substantial amount about the events and processes that make up the causes, conduct, and effects of the Gulf War. Moreover, I want to argue that postmodernist theoretical formulations which seek to completely destroy the distinction between "representations" and "reality", which assert the necessity of giving up on authoritative claims to truth, or which insist on the "prudence" of ditching overarching utopian aspirations, can be shown to be fundamentally flawed. In trying to counter such insufficiencies with the case of the Gulf War in mind, I want to assert the need for skepticism in the face of postmodern irony.