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The Gulf War as Simulacra: An Analysis of *Vishwa Ghatana* [World Affairs] on Nepal Television

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Abstract

Between early August 1990 and the end of February 1991, the coverage of the Persian Gulf War on Cable News Network (CNN) television showcases a comprehensive example of simulacra. Based on Jean Baudrillard's ideas of postmodern simulacra and simulation, this paper attempts to demonstrate how the simulacra of the Gulf War appeared before the Nepali audience through a domestic nationwide channel. The major source of news and perspectives of the contents of Nepal Television's world affairs program were the reports and images of CNN. The paper, with an approach to looking into the event retrospectively, demonstrates a case where CNN used a comparatively small television channel in a developing country to disseminate its cultural product to the local audience in their vernacular language. Taking Nepal Television (NTV) and its *Vishwa Ghatana* [World Affairs], a program dedicated to the world affairs as a case in point, this paper examines relationships between the rhetoric and reality in the theoretical and conceptual frame of simulacra and simulation based on Baudrillard's ideas.

Keywords: The Persian Gulf War, clean war, simulacra and simulation, television newscast

Introduction

People around the world today unprecedentedly depend on the media to create a mental image. Over a century after Walter Lippman's observation who said that the world people deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, and even out of mind (29), the precision, intensity and dominance of media to represent the world outside human heads have been extended enormously.

By the mid-twentieth century, television broadcasting restored the faces of newsmongers, as Mitchell Stephens describes its initial days. At one point, he argued that Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) broadcast daily "two 15-minute newscasts to a small number of audience on its New York television station by 1941" (274). Since then, over the years, television has been embraced by the world population as the extension of the eyes of human beings. Every day and every moment television channels are representing the people and the events from around the

world. Stephens argues that the television newscast is “to resemble the most ancient of methods for communicating news, such as a person telling other people what has happened” (273). It has materialized the imagination beautifully, which is imagined in *Mahabharat*, an epic, as the narrator tells blind King Dhritarashtra the progress of the war from day to day. Seating alongside Dhritarashtra at the palace, he describes every moment from the battlefield like the sports commentators do (Rajagopalachari 473). However, for Stephens, such resemblances what people see when they first examine the extremely “powerful news media, can be misleading” (273).

Today, with the advancement of information and communication technology, a sense of the frenetic and omnipresent simulacra exists everywhere. The sense constitutes the postmodern moment (Ferguson 53). Robert Ferguson invents that the relations between the media and the real world, today, have posed the question and induced a debate about the nature of realism (55). He elucidates Jean Baudrillard's idea by reiterating that the quality concerning the general practice of representing a persona or event has been questioned in this age. Hence, this paper attempts to examine the representation of events through a television programme with the theoretical lens of the concept of simulacra and simulation as described by Baudrillard as a postmodern phenomenon.

Baudrillard in a compilation of three thought-provoking essays, entitled *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, interrogates the Gulf War as a media event. Accordingly, as Patton explains, the Gulf War as a simulacrum of war was “less the representation of real war than a spectacle, which serves a variety of political and strategic purposes on all sides” (10). It means that the mass media can be taken as instruments to lead the general public toward pervasive simulacra in the postmodern era.

In the course of theorizing the postmodern phenomenon, Baudrillard uses the concepts of the simulacra and simulation. He argues that the concept of mass reproduction and reproducibility clarifies the nature of postmodern time, which characterizes the electronic media culture such as television, asserting that people “no longer watch TV,” it is a TV that watches people as he views that “the extreme reproducibility of images and sounds through electronic media forms” has created a culture of the hyperreal (27-29). He further argues that television gives “the viewer a picture of life, a simulacrum that is translated into a vision of human meaning that controls how people live” (29). Hence, he concludes that the present-day simulators attempt to make them real coinciding with their models of simulation (29). Thus, the people watching the war reporting on the television screen indulge in the risk of facing simulacra or hyper-real rather than the real.

On the other hand, Herman and Chomsky argue that the US mass media's practical definitions of worth are political in the extreme and fit well the expectations of the ruling elites (37), the state agency terms media coverage as part of its public diplomacy. The US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy estimates that Cable News Network's (CNN) English language broadcast reaches millions of viewers in some ninety countries, arguing that in societies with histories of media censorship and in corners of the Third World that only now are developing electronic media in which its impact is remarkable. The commission while submitting its report to the US Congress and the President of the US also present a definition, which reads that it is public diplomacy when the Secretary of State holds a press conference broadcast by the televisions (42). Hence, CNN news and images could also be considered part of US public diplomacy.

The US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reports that the USIA's mission is to explain and advocate US policies to the foreign audience (16). For this purpose, it states that television is a powerful force in shaping international events (42). Edwin J Feulner Jr., the Chairman of the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy states that the Persian Gulf crisis was from the start a battle for international public

opinion (5). One of the findings of the report reads that then President Bush, the United States Information Agency and the Inter agency Working Group did the effective use of public diplomacy in the Persian Gulf crisis. It also states that American interests are “best served by keeping international broadcasting, public affairs and educational exchange programs within the United States Information Agency” (8). The report suggests that private international television broadcasters such as CNN have become a primary source of news and information for political leaders, opinion makers and mass audiences around the world. It further states that the credibility, volume, speed and breadth of coverage of the US and international news by CNN, in particular, gives it extraordinary influence. The report also informs that Nepal TV broadcasts ninety minutes of CNN daily during that time (42). Thus, it could be perceived that CNN was trusted by the US government to cultivate desired perceptions of war toward the foreign people around the world. A desk editor who was with Nepal Television (NTV) since the late 1980s says that he used to translate CNN news and incorporate footage to make news on the Gulf War. He also recalls how his team worked for the weekly programme like *Vishwa Ghatana* with the support of CNN for the news and images.¹

Against this backdrop, the paper takes the case of a popular world-affairs programme on Nepal Television. It attempts to examine the depiction of the Persian Gulf War and subsequent issues related to Iraq on NTV through the theoretical lens of precision of simulacra and simulation. NTV is the country's only home channel at that time. To interpret the phenomena, the empirical data are taken from the presentation and interpretation of the Gulf War on NTV's *Vishwa Ghatana* and analyzed based on Baudrillard's argument concerning the hyper-reality in the postmodern era. As he states, people live in a hyper-reality. In other words, they live in both virtual and real worlds. The idea has been applied to interrogate the representation of the Gulf War on NTV.

Materials and Methods

The major source of NTV's programme *Vishwa Ghatana* was CNN, which was founded in 1980 in Atlanta, Georgia, the US. NTV, founded in 1985 by the Government of Nepal, approached CNN in 1990 to use its footage and programme free of cost during the visit of the then Chairperson Neer Shah to Atlanta.² CNN agreed to allow NTV to use of its footage and programme for NTV. The understanding instantly resulted in the dissemination of CNN's world views and perception of the Persian Gulf War through NTV.

The first episode of *Vishwa Ghatana* was broadcast through NTV on 24 May 24, 1989. It was broadcast on Wednesday and later on, it used to be broadcast every Thursday for a long time. Since its programmes were recorded in U-Matic, an analogue video cassette format, and yet to be converted into a digital format, most of the archives of *Vishwa Ghatana* were not playable. However, the programme-record maintained at the old register at the NTV visual archive within the premise of Singhadurbar, Kathmandu, which shows that a significant number of episodes covered the Persian Gulf War. Later, the episodes of the programme were recorded on Betamax, also known as Beta, a consumer-level analogue cassette, are playable. However, the condition of the cassettes is feeble and hard to play and obtain the content from them on the machine.

This paper, against this backdrop, broadly discusses the content of the *Vishwa Ghatana* programme from the period of the Persian Gulf War dated from early August 1990 to the end of

¹ Conversation with Maha Prasad Lamichhane who worked long time for NTV news section.

² Conversation with NTV's former General Manager Gambhir Kant Mainali who was involved in production work of *Vishwa Ghatana*.

February 1991 and its subsequent development on a random basis. The objective is to examine the influence of CNN. As people around the world approach each other through the lens of these media images today, the paper shows how the foreign content with their version of reality is being spread through domestic channels among the Nepali society.

As per the written record at the NTV archive, the first episode of *Vishwa Ghatana* was broadcast on 24 May 1989. Such a record had been maintained up to 1 September 1994. However, the cassettes only after 1994 were playable. The episodes before that are preserved on u-matic and only later episodes are on Beta. The cassettes containing the programme up to 2005 are also preserved in U-matic. Nevertheless, the random play of different episodes reveals that the images were presented with the CNN logo. The representation of the Gulf crisis in different episodes of *Vishwa Ghatana* even after 2000 could be taken as the example of CNN's relay and rely on the news on the Gulf crisis on the part of NTV. Different episodes of *Vishwa Ghatana* are found to be covering the versions of the US Army with the footage. Most of the news clips repeat the US stand of being in Iraq until the establishment of democracy.

On 26 February 2003, *Vishwa Ghatana* broadcast the news with the caption STAND FOR IRAQ and CNN logo. The essence of the news is that Iraq has the nuclear weapons of mass destruction and they should be destroyed. As much as 2.30 minute-long-news clip presents the image of then US President George W. Bush mentioning that he is planning to attack Iraq and saying that the UN resolution in this regard should be passed.

On 19 May 2003, a 2.5 minute-long- news clip on Gulf crisis played the then US Secretary of State Colin Powell's version of peace and development. It shows a footage of the multi-national military operation. It states that the US and the UK have been supporting democratization and the US administration will be continuing until the formation of a democratic government in Iraq. The caption "War in Iraq" with the CNN logo is placed as it is from CNN.

On 24 December 2003, *Vishwa Ghatana* broadcast the news with the as-it-is caption "The Capture of Saddam" and the logo of CNN. The news clip shows captured and feeble Saddam who claims in his capacity as the President that there are not any weapons of mass destruction. The narration describes that after nine months of hideout he was arrested by 600 US soldiers. He was pictured as saying I am President; I want a truce. The news clip was comprised of English narration as it is from CNN. The 11.33 minutes-long news clip states that the country will continue to rule by the administrator appointed by the US and it is as per the will of the Iraqi people.

On 22 September 2005, *Vishwa Ghatana* broadcast another news entitled a caption "IRAQ HANDING OVER WEOPENS Report: CNN." It was just the relay of the CNN with the images and logo. The caption "Breaking News" presented by CNN was placed as it is. As many as the 3.35 minutes-long footage comprised of the image of Saddam Husain with the news that Iraq handed over the 12000-page-long report on the weapons that exist in Iraq. It also covers the UN nuclear weapon inspection team and comments that mention that Iraq needs to cooperate with them.

Theoretical Framework

The Precision of Simulacra and Simulation

Baudrillard describes the different media outcomes as simulacra around three decades back. Later, he reiterates his idea by analyzing the media products during different occasions including the Gulf War. He elaborates his concept of simulation as the generation by models of a real without the origin or reality, that is, a hyperreal in true sense. His work "Precision of Simulacra and Simulation" begins with a quote from a biblical book, which reads as follows: "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth - it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true" (12-13). Here, it is argued that the contemporary

world subject would be detached from a contextual 'real' world, just as the sign-in new is considered to be detached from the original object (12-13).

Richard J. Lane holds that Baudrillard has a radical approach, where the subject has been reduced, fragmented and even destroyed by the dominance of the object. Lane further states: "our technological societies are object-dominated rather than subject-controlled" (139). Thus, according to Lane, Baudrillard not only maps out the world of television screen, rather theories the television phenomena at great length. Lane observes that like a meteor entering the Earth's atmosphere, Baudrillard's ideas have broken apart and scattered across many critical fields including global media (137).

Information and communication technology (ICT) has enabled the media outlets to spread the products every moment across the world. It has become widespread common knowledge that people from every walk of life have benefitted from the ICT alongside the mass media outlets. However, with the creation of the communication superhighway, the general public is facing the risk of being misinformed or even misinformed.

In the context of representation of events through TV, Baudrillard's idea needs to be understood as a reference to the general trend of the mediated world of postmodernity. Especially in the context where the audience often prefers simulacra to real life. His concept of hyperreal is illustrated through a wider range of cultural products, from advertising and architecture to cinema and universities, and more importantly through multinational TV such as CNN. He mentions the Borges fable as "the cartographers of the Empire drew up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly" (1). In this way, he means to say that it is the map that precedes the territory. According to him, the concept of simulacra is the territory that spreads over the map slowly. This situation is real, which continues to expand ever.

John Herbert believes, "globalization can ironically generate journalism that is ever more insular and parochial" (19), which is true. Paul Patton terms the Gulf War of 1991 as the Gulf War movie and states that it was "an instant history in the sense that the selected images, which were broadcast worldwide provoked immediate responses and then became frozen into the accepted story of the war" (3). In Patton's perception, war comprised of high-tech weapons, ecological disasters and the liberation of Kuwait. He states that in case anyone missed the first release, CNN produced its edited documentary. "CNN: War in the Gulf" was broadcast on TV that reached the world. He describes that Time Warner produced copies of it, which included "the published text, unedited correspondents' reports, photos and maps in the form of a single hypertext document" (3). He thus elucidates the idea of simulacra presented by Baudrillard.

In reference to the Persian Gulf War, Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman once describe: "On *Larry King Live* on October 16 (1990), Kuwait's ambassador to the United States, Sheik Saud Nasir al-Sabah, cited the young woman's testimony and the Amnesty International report as proof of atrocities in Kuwait" (17). They saw many people "came out and described all the brutalities of the Iraqis against my people...and they are also being corroborated by Amnesty International" (17). After the war was over, John R. MacArthur who was Harper's publisher unfolded this event: "'Nayirah' was Kuwait's ambassador's daughter and a member of the royal family of Kuwait" (17). Eventually, Baudrillard emphatically reaffirms that the Gulf War was not "a war, any more than 10,000 tons of bombs per day is sufficient to make it a war. Any more than the direct transmission by CNN of real-time information is sufficient to authenticate a war" (61). Hence, this kind of hyper-real of clean war was presented to a wider level of audience.

The Images through TV: From Reflection to Precise Simulacra

Today, media represents people or events through images. What people perceive is something always already mediated, so the news is just a representation in media and communication channels. Simulation is the process of creating simulacra in a real sense omnipresent for audiences. Baudrillard maps out four successive phases of the image appearing over time in line with the progression of science and technology.

Baudrillard proposes his “four successive phases of the image” (6). Among them, his first stage is sacramental image, which is the basic reality’s reflection. This image is an appearance that represents the order of sacrament. Since it is in the order of sacrament, it is an exact imitation of painting a mountain on canvas (6). He considers this image a faithful image. In this case, a sign reflects a reality in good appearance. In that sense, the first order falls in a category of pre-modern period that represents an artificial place marker for the real one. It is marked as reproducible real because of its uniqueness in representing both the image and its situation.

The second is an order of maleficence which could be identified as an order mask. It masks and perverts a basic reality. The second-order is an evil appearance of the order of malefic. Since it includes some editions, addition and deletion it creates soft dissimulation where there is a modification of the real to beautify and maintained originality to some extent at the same time (Baudrillard 6). Hence, the second order is the perversion of reality where reality is masked and denatured as an evil appearance. In this stage, an audience comes to believe the sign to be an unfaithful copy, of the order of maleficence.

In such a context, the images and signs do not have a faithful representation of reality to the audience. However, they can “hint at the existence of an obscure reality” (Baudrillard 6). Thus, the second-order is a manifestation of modernity. It is also the result of the industrial revolution. In this stage, no one can differentiate between representation and reality because there is a mass production of items with the trend of commodification. The ability of the commodity to imitate reality thus threatens the original version by replacing its originality. In this case, the copy appears just as real as its prototype.

The third order is sorcery, which could also be termed an illusion. It masks the absence of a basic reality. It plays at being an appearance as the order of sorcery (Baudrillard 6). In other words, it is yet the representation of the original copy with evil spirits. It is not the original copy and is twice removed from the original one, but it pretends to be original. This stage masks the absence of a profound reality in which the simulacrum pretends to be a faithful copy though it is a copy without an original. In this stage, the signs and images represent something real, but they do not happen. Instead, there are arbitrary images in which things are not related to each other. Thus, he terms it as the order of sorcery. In other words, it masks the absence of a profound reality. In his view, the Persian Gulf War on the CNN screen demonstrates an example. It is associated with the postmodernity of late capitalism. In this stage, as Baudrillard argues, “[T]he simulacrum precedes the original and the distinction between reality and representation vanishes, only the simulacrum exists” (6).

The last or the fourth one is the super or hyper-reality, which could be identified as a precise simulacrum. Since it bears no relation to any reality whatever, it is its pure simulacrum. It is not an original copy at all, but it looks so original that one cannot distinguish between the real copy and the duplicate copy. This usually happens in mass production based on mechanical reproduction (Baudrillard 6). In the fourth stage, it is no longer in the order of appearance at all, but of simulation. Here the signs merely reflect other signs and any claim to reality on the part of images or signs is only the order of

other such claims. Thus, in the last stage of a pure simulation copies are made in such a way that there is no longer a need for an original. The idea of originality disappears with its less importance in the stage of hyper-real.

The idea of above mentioned four stages can be further divided into three eras to see the development of precise simulacra. They are pre-modern, modern and post-modern eras. In the pre-modern era, technology was yet to be developed. People just had developed skills of etching, and engraving. They used to produce hardly one or two copies. Consequently, they used to be genuine and sacramental types of copies.

Later, in the modern era, technology came into existence. In the nineteenth century, lithography and photography had been invented, which allowed the feature of adding, deleting and modifying. That was the order of maleficence and order of sorcery. Here, cult or original traits need not be maintained. Any design is a product; imagination is more dominant in the post-modern era. The illusory cultural products and the world created by the media are pervasive because of the people's heavy indulgence in the media content. Thus, the writings of Baudrillard signal that the traces of the third phase of simulacra and simulation dates back to the nineteenth century with the introduction of mechanical production of contents. Gradually, it has reached to present context.

Baudrillard's identification of the metaphorical symbol has been considered dominant in the contemporary reality of world affairs on television. Only an open mind with a higher level of media literacy skills could diagnose and label what is real and unreal in the media in the widened sphere of global communication. It requires a higher level of consciousness for the careful dissection of the discrepancies in representing people and events and driving the world through the television screen. According to him, media, specifically television, can create false reality and reality as false, where people are compelled to believe that. He states that it is a guide to cover the atrocities of the West, where very few causalities took place on the US side during the Persian Gulf War. However, CNN broadcast such images, which make people believe in war, in Baudrillard's term, with the help of a fine illustration of the communication schema (44). In fact, in the postmodern age, media have been playing a crucial role to create the hyper-real world.

The Gulf War on Nepal Television: An Analysis

The data gathered from the content analysis of the *Vishwa Ghatana* and interviews with the people who were involved in the production indicates the phenomena of hyper-reality in this context. CNN supplied images to NTV to depict a clean war among the domestic audience. Dennis McQuail, in course of presenting the multifaceted phenomenon of global mass communication, indicates a situation where the content items of many kinds even journalistic items are imported to make up a part of domestic media output (220). *Vishwa Ghatana* of NTV represents such a phenomenon.

Vishwa Ghatana, a half-hour programme on world affairs, was run every Thursday during the prime time. CNN was its major source and the persons were deputed to monitor and translate the language for the global channel. The person assigned for the scriptwriting recalls how they depict Saddam Hussain as per the world view of CNN for as long as 25 minutes in some instances.³

Durga Nath Sharma, the presenter of the programme, expresses his satisfaction that as the compilation of international news and human interest stuffs *Vishwa Ghatana* run for many years and became popular (58-59). He mentions that by two years of the inception of NTV the

³ Conversation with Maha Prasad Lamichhane, a senior news person of NTV, who worked as the script writer of the programme for about 12 years.

programme proved its significance among a handful of home productions. Initially, he was involved in *Vishwa Ghatana* in his capacity as the Director of the news section of the institution (83).

In such a situation of hyper-reality, reality would be hard to distinguish from simulacra. Rather the simulacrum or the copy of reality appears as real-heightened reality. As the people around the world are surrounded by simulacra of media products in the age of mediated communication they are bound to encounter cleverly constructed, glossed and packaged versions of some reality. People are habituated to see a real location and reality in the images presented by television. What happens is that people left reality behind and encountered the world of artificial reality in all directions.

Before 1990, NTV and CNN signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to exchange the news and footage. It was an outcome of the Asian Broadcast Union's efforts. The Chairman of NTV Neer Shaha signed the MoU with CNN headquarters in Atlanta. Consequently, NTV started to receive the footage of the Gulf War from CNN. In this way, NTV began to send the footage from Nepal. During that time, NTV used to receive the war footage from different sources. Nevertheless, CNN was one of the major sources. Although NTV was availed by the footage or images from *Deutsche Welle*, BBC, Associated Press, *Agence France Presse*, ABC and NBC along with a few other agencies, CNN was a 30-40 per cent contributor in the context of international affairs.⁴ Apart from the regular news bulletins, the footage was used for the *Vishwa Ghatana* programme.

In a bid to explain the essence of Baudrillard's claim, the Gulf War was not real, but it was a programmed reality, John Patton argues that at the time, the TV Gulf War must have seemed to many viewers a perfect Baudrillardian simulacrum, a hyperreal scenario in which events lose their identity and the signifiers fade into one another. He further notes that occasionally, the absurdity of the media's self-representation as a purveyor of reality and immediacy broke through, in moments such as those when the CNN cameras crossed live to a group of reporters assembled somewhere in the Gulf, only to have them confess that they were also sitting around watching CNN to find out what was happening. The television news coverage appeared to have finally caught up with the logic of simulation (2), which eventually extended up to Nepal through the *Vishwa Ghatana* programme.

Conclusion

In recent years, people have rapidly come closer through various media and communication channels. However, these media images merely represent events or persons interwoven with the worldviews and perceptions. In that line of argument, Baudrillard's concept of simulacra remains instrumental for an analysis of media representation of media products from the perspectives of postmodernism. It is concerned with hyper-reality, that is, artificial copies of reality and postmodern representations. It is primarily concerned with the role the images play in the contemporary society to induce the people to construct the meaning out of the images. Reality is mediated by the images. But the problem is that the images illustrated through a wider range of cultural products themselves characterize as hyper-real. In this regard, the CNN-NTV cooperation, and the news and images played through the *Vishwa Ghatana* programme characterize the phenomena called a precision of simulacra and simulation.

Comparatively, small channels from the developing countries have been proved to be instrumental to disseminate the world views and perceptions of the big western multinational TV channels such as CNN. *Vishwa Ghatana*, in this regard, proved to be a window to ventilate the US worldviews on the Gulf crisis. Thus, the foreign contents with their version of reality are being

⁴ *Conversation with Neer Shah, founder Executive Chairperson of NTV.*

spread through domestic channels in different societies. The extreme reproducibility of images and sounds through television is creating, what Baudrillard terms, a culture of the hyper-real.

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