Empire of Illusion

The End of Literacy
and the Triumph of Spectacle

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III / The Illusion of Wisdom

Men die, but the plutocracy is immortal; and it is necessary that fresh generations should be trained to its service.
—Sinclair Lewis

The multiple failures that beset the country, from our mismanaged economy to our shredding of Constitutional rights to our lack of universal health care to our imperial debacles in the Middle East, can be laid at the door of institutions that produce and sustain our educated elite. Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Oxford, Cambridge, the University of Toronto, and the Paris Institute of Political Studies, along with most elite schools, do only a mediocre job of teaching students to question and think. They focus instead, through the filter of standardized tests, enrichment activities, AP classes, high-priced tutors, swanky private schools, entrance exams, and blind deference to authority, on creating hordes of competent systems managers. Responsibility for the collapse of the global economy runs in a direct line from the manicured quadrangles and academic halls in Cambridge, New Haven, Toronto, and Paris to the financial and political centers of power.

The elite universities disdain honest intellectual inquiry, which is by its nature distrustful of authority, fiercely independent, and often subversive. They organize learning around minutely specialized disciplines, narrow answers, and rigid structures designed to produce such answers. The established corporate hierarchies these institutions service—economic, political, and social—come with clear parameters, such as the primacy of an unfettered free market, and also with a highly
specialized vocabulary. This vocabulary, a sign of the "specialist" and, of course, the elitist, thwarts universal understanding. It keeps the uninitiated from asking unpleasant questions. It destroys the search for the common good. It dices disciplines, faculty, students, and finally experts into tiny, specialized fragments. It allows students and faculty to retreat into these self-imposed fiefdoms and neglect the most pressing moral, political, and cultural questions. Those who critique the system itself—people such as Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Dennis Kucinich, or Ralph Nader—are marginalized and shut out of the mainstream debate. These elite universities have banished self-criticism. They refuse to question a self-justifying system. Organization, technology, self-advancement, and information systems are the only things that matter.

In 1967, Theodor Adorno wrote an essay titled “Education After Auschwitz.” He argued that the moral corruption that made the Holocaust possible remained “largely unchanged” and that “the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds” must be uncovered, examined, and criticized through education. Schools had to teach more than skills. They had to teach values. If they did not, another Auschwitz was always possible.

“All political instruction finally should be centered upon the idea that Auschwitz should never happen again,” he wrote:

This would be possible only when it devotes itself openly, without fear of offending any authorities, to this most important of problems. To do this, education must transform itself into sociology, that is, it must teach about the societal play of forces that operates beneath the surface of political forms.

If we do not grasp the “societal play of forces that operates beneath the surface of political forms,” we will be cursed with a more ruthless form of corporate power, one that does away with artifice and the seduction of a consumer society, and wields power through naked repression.

I had lunch in Toronto with Henry Giroux, professor of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Canada. Giroux was for many years the Waterbury Chair Professor at Penn State. He has long been one of the most prescient and vocal critics of the corporate state and the systematic destruction of American education. He was driven, because of his work, to the margins of academia in the United States. He asked the uncomfortable questions Adorno knew should be asked by university professors. Giroux, who wrote The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex, left in 2004 for Canada.

“The emergence of what Eisenhower had called the military-industrial-academic complex had secured a grip on higher education that may have exceeded even what he had anticipated and most feared,” Giroux tells me. “Universities, in general, especially following the events of 9/11, were under assault by Christian nationalists, reactionary neoconservatives, and market fundamentalists for allegedly representing the weak link in the war on terrorism. Right-wing students were encouraged to spy on the classes of progressive professors, the corporate grip on the university was tightening, as was made clear not only in the emergence of business models of governance, but also in the money being pumped into research and programs that blatantly favored corporate interests. And at Penn State, where I was located at the time, the university had joined itself at the hip with corporate and military power. Put differently, corporate and Pentagon money was now funding research projects, and increasingly knowledge was being militarized in the service of developing weapons of destruction, surveillance, and death. Couple this assault with the fact that faculty were becoming irrelevant as an oppositional force. Many disappeared into discourses that threatened no one, some simply were too scared to raise critical issues in their classrooms for fear of being fired, and many simply no longer had the conviction to uphold the university as a democratic public sphere.”

The moral nihilism embraced by elite universities would have terrified Adorno. He knew that radical evil was possible only with the collaboration of a timid, cowed, and confused population, a system of propaganda and mass media that offered little more than spectacle and entertainment, and an educational system that did not transmit transcendent values or nurture the capacity for individual conscience. He feared a culture that banished the anxieties and complexities of moral choice and embraced a childish hypermasculinity.
Capitalism originally sought to police play and pleasure, because any attempt to replace work as the central life interest threatened the economic survival of the system. The family, the state, and religion engendered a variety of patterns of moral regulation to control desire and ensure compliance with the system of production. However, as capitalism developed, consumer culture and leisure time expanded. The principles that operated to repress the individual in the workplace and the home were extended to the shopping mall and recreational activity. The entertainment industry and consumer culture produced what Herbert Marcuse called “repressive desublimation.” Through this process individuals unwittingly subscribed to the degraded version of humanity.14

This cult of distraction, as Rojek points out, masks the real disintegration of culture. It conceals the meaninglessness and emptiness of our own lives. It seduces us to engage in imitative consumption. It deflects the moral questions arising from mounting social injustice, growing inequalities, costly imperial wars, economic collapse, and political corruption. The wild pursuit of status and wealth has destroyed our souls and our economy. Families live in sprawling mansions financed with mortgages they can no longer repay. Consumers recklessly rang up Coach handbags and Manolo Blahnik shoes on credit cards because they seemed to confer a sense of identity and merit. Our favorite hobby, besides television, used to be, until reality hit us like a tsunami, shopping. Shopping used to be the compensation for spending five days a week in tiny cubicles. American workers are ground down by corporations that have disempowered them, used them, and have now discarded them.

Celebrities have fame free of responsibility. The fame of celebrities, wrote Mills, disguises those who possess true power: corporations and the oligarchic elite. Magical thinking is the currency not only of celebrity culture, but also of totalitarian culture. And as we sink into an economic and political morass, we are still controlled, manipulated and distracted by the celluloid shadows on the dark wall of Plato’s cave. The fantasy of celebrity culture is not designed simply to entertain. It is designed to keep us from fighting back.

“What Orwell feared were those who would ban books,” Neil Postman wrote:

What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egotism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumble-puppy. As Huxley remarked in Brave New World Revisited, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny “failed to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions.” In 1984, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In Brave New World, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.15

Mark Andrejevic, a professor of communication studies at the University of Iowa at Iowa City, writes that reality shows like Big Brother and Survivor glamorize the intrusiveness of the surveillance state, presenting it as “one of the hip attributes of the contemporary world,” “an entrée into the world of wealth and celebrity,” and even a moral good. In his book Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched, he quotes veterans of The Real World, Road Rules, and Temptation Island who speak about their on-air personal growth and the therapeutic value of being constantly watched. As Josh on Big Brother explains, “Everyone should have an audience.” Big Brother, in which ten cohabiting strangers willingly submit to round-the-clock video monitoring, is a celebration of the surveillance state. More than twice as many young people apply to MTV’s Real World show than to Harvard, for a chance to live under constant surveillance. But the use of hidden cameras—
We are a culture that has been denied, or has passively given up, the linguistic and intellectual tools to cope with complexity, to separate illusion from reality. We have traded the printed word for the gleaming image. Public rhetoric is designed to be comprehensible to a ten-year-old child or an adult with a sixth-grade reading level. Most of us speak at this level, are entertained and think at this level. We have transformed our culture into a vast replica of Pinocchio’s Pleasure Island, where boys were lured with the promise of no school and endless fun. They were all, however, turned into donkeys—a symbol, in Italian culture, of ignorance and stupidity.

Functional illiteracy in North America is epidemic. There are 7 million illiterate Americans. Another 27 million are unable to read well enough to complete a job application, and 30 million can’t read a simple sentence. There are some 50 million who read at a fourth- or fifth-grade level. Nearly a third of the nation’s population is illiterate or barely literate—a figure that is growing by more than 2 million a year. A third of high-school graduates never read another book for the rest of their lives, and neither do 42 percent of college graduates. In 2007, 80 percent of the families in the United States did not buy or read a book. And it is not much better beyond our borders. Canada has an illiterate and semiliterate population estimated at 42 percent of the whole, a proportion that mirrors that of the United States.

Television, a medium built around the skillful manipulation of images, ones that can overpower reality, is our primary form of mass communication. A television is turned on for six hours and forty-seven minutes a day in the average household. The average American daily watches more than four hours of television. That amounts to twenty-eight hours a week, or two months of uninterrupted television-watching a year. That same person will have spent nine years in front of a television by the time he or she is sixty-five. Television speaks in a language of familiar, comforting clichés and exciting images. Its format, from reality shows to sit-coms, is predictable. It provides a mass, virtual experience that colors the way many people speak and interact with one another. It creates a false sense of intimacy with our elite—celebrity actors, newpeople, politicians, business tycoons, and sports stars. And everything and everyone that television transmits is validated and enhanced by the medium. If a person is not seen on television, on some level he or she is not important. Television confers authority and power. It is the final arbitrator for what matters in life.

Hour after hour, day after day, week after week, we are bombarded with the cant and spectacle pumped out over the airwaves or over computer screens by highly-paid pundits, corporate advertisers, talk-show hosts, and gossip-fueled entertainment networks. And a culture dominated by images and slogans seduces those who are functionally literate but who make the choice not to read. There have been other historical periods with high rates of illiteracy and vast propaganda campaigns. But not since the Soviet and fascist dictatorships, and perhaps the brutal authoritarian control of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, has the content of information was as skillfully and ruthlessly controlled and manipulated. Propaganda has become a substitute for ideas and ideology. Knowledge is confused with how we are made to feel. Commercial brands are mistaken for expressions of individuality. And in this precipitous decline of values and literacy, among those who cannot read and those who have given up reading, fertile ground for a new totalitarianism is being seeded.

The culture of illusion thrives by robbing us of the intellectual and linguistic tools to separate illusion from truth. It reduces us to the level and dependency of children. It impoverishes language. The *Princeton Review* analyzed the transcripts of the Gore-Bush debates of 2000, the Clinton-Bush-Perot debates of 1992, the Kennedy-Nixon debate of 1960, and the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858. It reviewed these transcripts using a standard vocabulary test that indicates the minimum educational standard needed for a reader to grasp the text. In the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Lincoln spoke at the educational level of an eleventh grader (11.2), and Douglas addressed the crowd using a vocabulary suitable (12.0) for a high-school graduate. In the Kennedy-Nixon
debate, the candidates spoke in language accessible to tenth graders. In the 1992 debates, Clinton spoke at a seventh-grade level (7.6), while Bush spoke at a sixth-grade level (6.8), as did Perot (6.3). During the 2000 debates, Bush spoke at a sixth-grade level (6.7) and Gore at a high seventh-grade level (7.6). This obvious decline was, perhaps, raised slightly by Barack Obama in 2008, but the trends above are clear. Those captive to images cast ballots based on what candidates make them feel. They vote for a slogan, a smile, perceived sincerity, and attractiveness, along with the carefully crafted personal narrative of the candidate. It is style and story, not content and fact, that inform mass politics. Politicians have learned that to get votes they must replicate the faux intimacy established between celebrities and the public. There has to be a sense, created through artful theatrical staging and scripting by political spin machines, that the politician is "one of us." The politician, like the celebrity, has to give voters the impression that he or she, as Bill Clinton used to say, feels their pain. We have to be able to see ourselves in them. If this connection, invariably a product of extremely sophisticated artifice, is not established, no politician can get any traction in a celebrity culture.

The rhetoric in campaigns eschews reality for the illusory promise of the future and the intrinsic greatness of the nation. Campaigns have a deadening sameness, the same tired clichés, the concerned expressions of the sensitive candidates who are like you and me, and the gushing words of gratitude to the crowds of supporters. The metaphors are not empty. They say something about us and our culture. Changes in metaphors are, as the critic Northrop Frye understood, fundamental changes.

"Are we going to look forward," asked candidate Obama at an "American Jobs Tour" rally in Columbus, Ohio, on October 10, 2008, "or are we going to look backwards?"

**AUDIENCE:** Forward!

**OBAMA:** Are we going to look forward with hope, or are we going to look backwards with fear?

**AUDIENCE:** Hope! Forward!

**OBAMA:** Ohio, if you are willing to organize with me, if you are willing to go vote right now—we've got—you could go to the early voting right across the street, right on—right there. [Cheers and applause.] If every one of you are willing to grab your friends and your neighbors and make the phone calls and do what's required, I guarantee you we will not just win Ohio, we will win this general election. And you and I together, we will change this country and we will change the world. [Cheers and applause.] God bless you. God bless the United States of America. [Cheers and applause.]

Celebrity culture has bequeathed to us what Benjamin DeMott calls "junk politics." Junk politics does not demand justice or the reparation of rights. It personalizes and moralizes issues rather than clarifying them. "It's impatient with articulated conflict, enthusiastic about America's optimism and moral character, and heavily dependent on feel-your-pain language and gesture," DeMott notes. The result of junk politics is that nothing changes—"meaning zero interruption in the processes and practices that strengthen existing, interlocking systems of socioeconomic advantage." It redefines traditional values, tilting "courage toward braggadocio, sympathy toward mawkishness, humility toward self-disrespect, identification with ordinary citizens toward distrust of brains." Junk politics "miniaturizes large, complex problems at home while maximizing threats from abroad. It's also given to abrupt, unexplained reversals of its own public stances, often spectacularly bloating problems previously miniaturized." And finally, it "seeks at every turn to obliterate voters' consciousness of socioeconomic and other differences in their midst." Politics has become a product of a diseased culture that seeks its purpose in celebrities who are, as Boorstin wrote, "receptacles into which we pour our own purposelessness. They are nothing but ourselves seen in a magnifying mirror."

Those captivated by the cult of celebrity do not examine voting records or compare verbal claims with written and published facts and reports. The reality of their world is whatever the latest cable news show, political leader, advertiser, or loan officer says is reality. The illiterate, the semiliterate, and those who live as though they are illiterate are effectively cut off from the past. They live in an eternal present. They do not understand the predatory loan deals that drive them into foreclosure and bankruptcy. They cannot decipher the fine print on the
credit card agreements that plunge them into unmanageable debt. They repeat thought-terminating clichés and slogans. They are hostage to the constant jingle and manipulation of a consumer culture. They seek refuge in familiar brands and labels. They eat at fast-food restaurants not only because it is cheap, but also because they can order from pictures rather than from a menu. And those who serve them, also often semiliterate or illiterate, punch in orders on cash registers whose keys are usually marked with pictures. Life is a state of permanent amnesia, a world in search of new forms of escapism and quick, sensual gratification.

Celebrity images are reflections of our idealized selves sold back to us. Yet they actually constrain rather than expand our horizons and experiences. “One of the deepest and least remarked features of the Age of Contrivance is what I would call the mirror effect,” Boorstin wrote.

Nearly everything we do to enlarge our world, to make life more interesting, more varied, more exciting, more vivid, more “fabulous,” more promising, in the long run has an opposite effect. In the extravagance of our expectations and in our ever increasing power, we transform elusive dreams into graspable images within with each of us can fit. By doing so we mark the boundaries of our world with a wall of mirrors. Our strenuous and elaborate efforts to enlarge experience have the unintended result of narrowing it. In frenetic quest for the unexpected, we end by finding only the unexpectedness we have planned for ourselves. We meet ourselves coming back.39

The most essential skill in political theater and a consumer culture is artifice. Political leaders, who use the tools of mass propaganda to create a sense of faux intimacy with citizens, no longer need to be competent, sincere, or honest. They need only to appear to have these qualities. Most of all they need a story, a personal narrative. The reality of the narrative is irrelevant. It can be completely at odds with the facts. The consistency and emotional appeal of the story are paramount. Those who are best at deception succeed. Those who have not mastered the art of entertainment, who fail to create a narrative or do not have one fashioned for them by their handlers, are ignored. They become “unreal.”

An image-based culture communicates through narratives, pictures, and pseudo-drama. Scandalous affairs, hurricanes, untimely deaths, train wrecks—these events play well on computer screens and television. International diplomacy, labor union negotiations, and convoluted bailout packages do not yield exciting personal narratives or stimulating images. A governor who patronizes call girls becomes a huge news story. A politician who proposes serious regulatory reform or advocates curbing wasteful spending is boring. Kings, queens, and emperors once used their court conspiracies to divert their subjects. Today cinematic, political, and journalistic celebrities distract us with their personal foibles and scandals. They create our public mythology. Acting, politics, and sports have become, as they were in Nero’s reign, interchangeable. In an age of images and entertainment, in an age of instant emotional gratification, we neither seek nor want honesty or reality. Reality is complicated. Reality is boring. We are incapable or unwilling to handle its confusion. We ask to be indulged and comforted by clichés, stereotypes, and inspirational messages that tell us we can be whoever we seek to be, that we live in the greatest country on earth, that we are endowed with superior moral and physical qualities, and that our future will always be glorious and prosperous, either because of our own attributes or our national character or because we are blessed by God. In this world, all that matters is the consistency of our belief systems. The ability to amplify lies, to repeat them and have surrogates repeat them in endless loops of news cycles, gives lies and mythical narratives the aura of uncontested truth. We become trapped in the linguistic prison of incessant repetition. We are fed words and phrases like war on terror or pro-life or change, and within these narrow parameters, all complex thought, ambiguity, and self-criticism vanish.

“Entertainment was an expression of democracy,throwing off the chains of alleged cultural repression,” Gabler wrote. “So too was consumption, throwing off the chains of the old production-oriented culture and allowing anyone to buy his way into his fantasy. And, in the end, both entertainment and consumption often provided the same intoxication: the sheer, endless pleasure of emancipation from reason, from responsibility, from tradition, from class, and from all the other bonds that restrained the self.”31
When a nation becomes unmoored from reality, it retreats into a world of magic. Facts are accepted or discarded according to the dictates of a preordained cosmology. The search for truth becomes irrelevant. Our national discourse is dominated by manufactured events, from celebrity gossip to staged showcasings of politicians to elaborate entertainment and athletic spectacles. All are sold to us through the detailed personal narratives of those we watch. "The pseudo-events which flood our consciousness are neither true nor false in the old familiar senses," Boorstin wrote. "The very same advances which have made them possible have also made the images—however planned, contrived, or disturbed—more vivid, more attractive, more impressive, and more persuasive than reality itself." 32

In his book *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippmann distinguished between "the world outside and the pictures in our heads." He defined a "stereotype" as an oversimplified pattern that helps us find meaning in the world. Lippmann cited examples of the crude "stereotypes we carry about in our heads" of whole groups of people such as "Germans," "South Europeans," "Negroes," "Harvard men," "agitators," and others. These stereotypes, Lippmann noted, give a reassuring and false consistency to the chaos of existence. They offer easily grasped explanations of reality and are closer, as Boorstin noted, to propaganda because they simplify rather than complicate. 33

Pseudo-events, dramatic productions orchestrated by publicists, political machines, television, Hollywood, or advertisers, however, are very different. They have the capacity to appear real, even though we know they are staged. They are capable because they can evoke a powerful emotional response of overwhelming reality and replacing it with a fictional narrative that often becomes accepted as truth. The power of pseudo-events to overtake reality was what plunged the marines who returned from Iwo Jima into such despair. The unmasking of a stereotype damages and often destroys its credibility. But pseudo-events are immune to this defamation. The exposure of the elaborate mechanisms behind the pseudo-event only adds to its fascination and its power. This is the basis of the convoluted television reporting on how effectively political campaigns and candidates have been stage-managed. Reporters, especially those on television, no longer ask whether the message is true but rather whether the pseudo-event worked or did not work as political theater. Pseudo-events are judged on how effectively we have been manipulated by illusion. Those events that appear real are relished and lauded. Those that fail to create a believable illusion are deemed failures. Truth is irrelevant. Those who succeed in politics, as in most of the culture, are those who create the most convincing fantasies.

A public that can no longer distinguish between truth and fiction is left to interpret reality through illusion. Random facts or obscure bits of data and trivia are used either to bolster illusion and give it credibility, or discarded if they interfere with the message. The worse reality becomes—the more, for example, foreclosures and unemployment sky-rocket—the more people seek refuge and comfort in illusions. When opinions cannot be distinguished from facts, when there is no universal standard to determine truth in law, in science, in scholarship, or in reporting the events of the day, when the most valued skill is the ability to entertain, the world becomes a place where lies become true, where people can believe what they want to believe. This is the real danger of pseudo-events and why pseudo-events are far more pernicious than stereotypes. They do not explain reality, as stereotypes attempt to, but replace reality. Pseudo-events redefine reality by the parameters set by their creators. These creators, who make massive profits selling illusions, have a vested interest in maintaining the power structures they control.

The old production-oriented culture demanded what the historian Warren Susman termed character. The new consumption-oriented culture demands what he called personality. The shift in values is a shift from a fixed morality to the artifice of presentation. The old cultural values of thrift and moderation honored hard work, integrity, and courage. The consumption-oriented culture honors charm, fascination, and likeability. "The social role demanded of all in the new culture of personality was that of a performer," Susman wrote. "Every American was to become a performing self." 34

Totalitarian systems begin as propagandistic movements that ostensibly teach people to "believe what they want," but that is a ruse. The Christian Right, for example, argues that it wants Intelligent Design, or creationism, to be offered as an alternative to evolution in public-school biology classes. But once you allow creationism, which
no reputable biologist or paleontologist accepts as legitimate science, to be considered as an alternative to real science, you begin the deadly assault against dispassionate, honest, intellectual inquiry. Step into the hermetic world of many Christian schools or colleges and there are no alternatives to creationism offered to students. Once these systems have control, the Christian advocates’ purported love of alternative viewpoints and debates is replaced by an iron and irrational conformity to illusion.

Pseudo-events, which create their own semblance of reality, serve in the wider culture the same role creationism serves for the Christian Right. Pseudo-events destabilize truth. They are convincing enough and appear real enough to manufacture their own facts. We carry within us feelings and perceptions about politicians, celebrities, our nation, and our culture that are mirages generated by pseudo-events. The use of pseudo-events to persuade rather than overtly brainwash renders millions of us unable to see or question the structures and systems that are impoverishing us and in some cases destroying our lives. The flight into illusion sweeps away the core values of the open society. It corrodes the ability to think for oneself, to draw independent conclusions, to express dissent when judgment and common sense tell you something is wrong, to be self-critical, to challenge authority, to grasp historical facts, to advocate for change, and to acknowledge that there are other views, different ways, and structures of being that are morally and socially acceptable. A populace deprived of the ability to separate lies from truth, that has become hostage to the fictional semblance of reality put forth by pseudo-events, is no longer capable of sustaining a free society.

Those who slip into this illusion ignore the signs of impending disaster. The physical degradation of the planet, the cruelty of global capitalism, the looming oil crisis, the collapse of financial markets, and the danger of overpopulation rarely impinge to prick the illusions that warp our consciousness. The words, images, stories, and phrases used to describe the world in pseudo-events have no relation to what is happening around us. The advances of technology and science, rather than obliterating the world of myth, have enhanced its power to deceive. We live in imaginary, virtual worlds created by corporations that profit from our deception. Products and experiences—indeed, experience as

a product—offered up for sale, sanctified by celebrities, are mirages. They promise us a new personality. They promise us success and fame. They promise to mend our brokenness.

“People whose governing habit is the relinquishment of power, competence, and responsibility, and whose characteristic suffering is the anxiety of futility, make excellent spenders,” wrote Wendell Berry in The Unsettling of America. “They are the ideal consumers. By inducing in them little panics of boredom, powerlessness, sexual failure, mortality, paranoia, they can be made to buy (or vote for) virtually anything that is ‘attractively packaged.’” And there are no shortages of experiences and products that, for a price, promise to stimulate us, make us powerful, sexy, invincible, admired, beautiful, and unique.

Blind faith in illusions is our culture’s secular version of being born again. These illusions assure us that happiness and success is our birthright. They tell us that our catastrophic collapse is not permanent. They promise that pain and suffering can always be overcome by tapping into our hidden, inner strengths. They encourage us to bow down before the cult of the self. To confront these illusions, to puncture their mendacity by exposing the callousness and cruelty of the corporate state, signals a loss of faith. It is to become an apostate. The culture of illusion, one of happy thoughts, manipulated emotions, and trust in the beneficence of power, means we sing along with the chorus or are instantly disappeared from view like the losers on a reality show.