

Lost in the Theatre of Data, Dada, and Emotional Manipulation

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

"It is not only information that they need – in this Age of Fact, information often dominates their attention and overwhelms their capacities to assimilate it...What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves...what may be called the sociological imagination." – C. Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination, 1959

"'Our own death is indeed, unimaginable,' Freud said in 1915, 'and whenever we make the attempt to imagine it we can perceive that we really survive as spectators.' It is thus the very habit of military situations that turn them theatrical. And it is their utter unthinkableness: it is impossible for a participant to believe that he is taking part in such murderous proceedings in his own character. The whole thing is too grossly farcical, perverse, cruel, and absurd to be credited as a form of 'real life.' Seeing warfare as theatre provides a psychic escape for the participant: with a sufficient sense of theatre, he can perform his duties without implicating his 'real' self and without impairing his innermost conviction that the world is still a rational place. Just before the attack on Loos, Major Pilditch testifies to 'a queer new feeling these last few days, intensified last night. A sort of feeling of unreality as if I were acting on a stage....'" – Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory

"The society whose modernisation has reached the stage of integrated spectacle is characterised by the combined effect of five principal factors: incessant technological renewal, integration of state and economy, generalised secrecy, unanswerable lies, and eternal present" – Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle

"Hi-diddle-dee-dee

An actor's life for me..

Hi-diddle-dee-dum

An actor's life is fun"

– Walt Disney, "Pinocchio"

It was 100 years ago this November 11th when World War I ended. This "War to End All Wars," resulted in the death of approximately 9 million soldiers and 9 million civilians. The brilliant leaders who waged this war – the crème de la crème – men who, in their own warped minds, possessed impeccable logic and rigorous reasoning, expected the war to be over in a few months. It lasted four years. Like their more current American counterparts

before they launched the war against Iraq in 2003, they expected a “cakewalk” or a “slam-dunk” (the former term is racist and the latter a sports term, perfect unconscious verbiage for the slaughter of “lesser” humans). All these principals were data demented, they had lined up their little toy ducks in a row and expected a neat and logical outcome. Or so they said. The new weapons would make quick mincemeat of the enemy. Technology would expeditiously destroy to expeditiously save. Nothing has changed in one hundred years

Such instrumental logic and its positivistic data reductionism has now deeply infected the popular mind, as common sense has been destroyed by government and mass media propaganda so blatantly ridiculous that only a hypnotized person could believe it. But so many have been hypnotized and follow the repetitious and overwhelming streaming of each day’s markedly ad hoc “news,” following the Pied Piper to their doom via the wizardry of digital technology. Raptly attentive to the “politainment” that passes for journalism, they pin ball between alleged assertions of fact cobbled together with tendentious and faulty logic and theatrical displays of emotion meant to manipulate an audience of spectators in the national theatre of absurdity. It is all show and tell in which the audience is expected to react emotionally rather than think, with images and feelings having replaced concentrated reflection, and facts and evidence having disappeared like a coin from a magician’s hand.

This technological surround-sound theatre has reduced everything to play-acting, with audiences and their puppeteers playing reciprocal parts. Theodor Adorno analogizes thus:

Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies. The sound film, far surpassing the theatre of illusion, leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience, who is unable to respond within the structure of the film, yet deviate from its precise detail without losing the thread of the story; hence the film forces its victims to equate it directly with reality. The stunting of the mass-media consumer’s powers of imagination and spontaneity does not have to be traced back to any psychological mechanisms; he must ascribe the loss of those attributes to the objective nature of the products themselves, especially to the most characteristic of them, the sound film. They are so designed that quickness, powers of observation, and experience are undeniably needed to apprehend them at all; yet sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts.

Meanwhile, the real business of murder, mayhem, and economic exploitation continues apace. As one “small” example of a fact relegated to oblivion by our mainstream media, in Gaza this past week, Israeli occupation forces killed Nasser Azim Musabeh (12), Mohammed Nayef Ai (14), Mohammed Ali Mohasmmed Anshasi, (18), Iyar Khalil Al-Sha’er (18), Mohasmmed Bassam Mohammed (24), Mohammed Walid Haniyeh (23), and Mohammed Ashraf Awawdeh (23). But such facts don’t matter since these dead young people were already reduced to invisible people not worthy of a mention.

Rather, pseudo-debates and pseudo-events are created by media and political magicians whose goal is to confuse the audience through information (data) and emotional overload into thinking that they are “freely” choosing what is always the same, to paraphrase Theodor Adorno. It is a conjurer’s act of mind manipulation in support of a repressive political and economic ideology built on false dichotomies. The political/media empire creates its own “reality” that the captivated audience takes as reality, as their emotions swing from outrage to laughter and their electronic clickers jump them from show to show, from CNN or Fox or the New York Times to Saturday Night Live in the land where there is no

business but show business. “Amusing ourselves to death,” as Neal Postman so aptly put it. To which I would add: As we put others to death outside the show.

The other day I was in a library and was looking through a large book of World War I photographs from the Imperial War Museum that I found lying on a table. They were arranged chronologically from the start of the war in 1914 to its end in 1918. Fascinating photos, I thought. I went through the book page by page, examining the photos one by one, beginning with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand by a young guy, on through the photos of stiff British war-hawk leaders in double-breasted suits, through photos of the trenches and the new weapons until I reached photos of the treaty to “end” it. By the conclusion, I felt exhausted and knew nothing new. Photos as data. Click, click, click: How many are enough? It was like spending an hour with the mainstream corporate media, and much of the alternative press. It was like a black and white movie in no motion. Same old, same old, as a young man I know often says when I ask him what’s new. Same old data via photographs. War is hell. Ditto. Bodies get blown to bits and decompose in mud. Ditto. Heads get separated from necks and blood pours forth. Ditto. War is hell. Ditto. Great leaders meet and end the carnage. Ditto.

Ditto Data Dada. I had to imagine the subsequent pages and years as these great leaders, so disgusted by war, prepared for the next one, and the one following, etc. Ditto, data, dada.

I understood then why the first famous Dadaist piece of art that emerged from absolute disgust with the data driven crazies who started and waged WW I was Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 “Fountain,” a porcelain urinal signed by R. Mutt, a message to tell the “great” leaders to piss off.

But Dadaist art, like all avant-garde art, gets quickly sucked into the maw of the entertainment complex, which is another name for the propaganda complex. As the word media means etymologically – magicians – these sorcerer’s have developed and use every bit of black magic to engineer the consent of the bewildered herd, to blend the words of two of America’s key propagandists from the past: Edward Bernays, Freud’s American nephew and President Woodrow Wilson’s master propagandist for WW I, and the famous journalist Walter Lippman. Bernays put it straight and succinctly:

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of engineering of consent. The engineering of consent is the very essence of the democratic process. It affects almost every aspect of our daily lives.

Last week I attended a production of the play *Annie* in a community theatre in a liberal town in the northeast. The show was sold out, and I was there because my lovely granddaughter was performing in the play, one whose story and music I was very familiar with. The show was delightful and the audience was enraptured by the performances and the wonderful music. If you are not familiar with the story, it is about an 11 year old orphan named Annie who, in 1933 when FDR has assumed the presidency, is in search of her biological parents. Together with other orphans in a NYC orphanage, she is treated miserably by a character named Miss Hannigan. By the play’s end, Annie is adopted by a wealthy man to presumably live happily ever after.

At one point in the play, this wealthy man brings Annie to Washington D. C. to meet his friend, President Roosevelt. He says to FDR, Franklin, you need to do something and get my

factories humming again. In this scene, Roosevelt and his cabinet, the wealthy man, and Annie sing the very upbeat song – “Tomorrow” – which Roosevelt loves since it offers hope in the dark time of the great depression. Everyone sings the stirring song, many in the audience silently singing along and the mood in the theater elevates. By the play’s end Annie is adopted by the wealthy man, whose name is Daddy Warbucks. This super-capitalist billionaire with a mansion on Fifth Avenue and a heart of gold has made his riches making weapons for WW I, though this is not spelled out in the show. I kept wondering what the audience of liberal-minded people were thinking, or if they were, about the strange fact the hero of the show was a man with a war-monger’s name whose factories had produced armaments that had created tens of thousands of war orphans and who was urging the liberal Roosevelt to get his munitions factories up and running again in 1933. I suspected they weren’t thinking about this at all and that the work of subtle propaganda was being magically induced at an unconscious level. For how could such a nice, caring guy, who adopts the cute Annie and who sings such tuneful songs, be a killer?

I guiltily thought: I shouldn’t be thinking such thoughts, as I also thought how can I not think them. Emotionally I felt one thing, and intellectually another. This was the classic double-bind.

Upon further reflection, I realized that this is how the finest propaganda works. It splits people in two and works subtly. Emotionally you are pulled one way, and intellectually another, if you are thinking at all. There are certain connections you are not supposed to make or verbalize, when to oppose the powerful sway of the media’s emotional appeals is considered a betrayal of your humanity and certain victims, such as a cute orphan or acceptable victims, even when that doesn’t follow logically.

But in the Magic Theatre that is American life, false choices are the essence of the show. Democrats vs. Republicans, Clinton vs. Bush, Bush vs. Obama, Obama vs. Trump, liberals vs. conservatives, and on and on endlessly. It’s Dada, my friends, all theater. The next election will change everything, right? “The sun’ll come out/Tomorrow, So ya gotta hang on/’Till tomorrow/ Come what may.”

Only when we leave the theatre can we see the real play. But that’s a bold act for which no Oscars, Tonys, or Emmys are handed out. And outside the theater’s warm embrace, it’s cold, and you feel like an orphan looking for a home, no matter how much blood-money purchased it. But don’t go in; it’s a trap.

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