

Anatomizing our Schizophrenia

by [James Como](#) (April 2021)



Fantastic Composition, Tavern, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, 1920

Once—long enough ago for the grandparents of anyone reading this not to have been born—things were real (I mean the world, not plastic or nylon), but we have forgotten that. Now the world is as we please to see it.

For example, now a person can have a penis but not be male, simply because that person ‘identifies’ as, that is,

personally prefers to *be*, a woman, or both a man and a woman, or neither. And whereas in grandmother's day such a person would have been regarded as, at best, 'quirky', now anyone who does *not* go along is an 'ist' of some sort—perhaps a 'genderist'?

The unreal became a double helix of our inner and outer worlds, as the Selfism of the Me Decade of the Sixties and the Culture of Narcissism of the Seventies saturated the DNA of Western culture. Near the turn of the twentieth century 'character' became 'personality,' the root of which word lies in 'mask'.

One acquired *traits* rather than virtues and flaws and could not only reinvent oneself (e.g. Oscar Wilde, Madonna) but be celebrated for the act. And it became precisely that, an act. We became a population of performers, even creating fictionalized, curated Selves in the form of online 'profiles.'

Lying beneath such a *weltanschauung* of unreality is its epistemology. But since theories of knowledge—from Plato to Descartes to Bishop Berkely to the non-existence of consciousness itself—are above my pay grade, we're better off at ground-level. Martin Luther may have made "every man his own priest," but post-modernism, arising inevitably from the detritus of our fake *imperium*, has made each of us the maker of worlds, each with its cause, slogans, concepts, policies and programs, style, trends, and linguistic requirements.

Some decades ago Daniel J. Boorstin gave us *The Image*, where he introduced us to the Pseudo-event and to the classic definition of a celebrity as someone who is famous for being well-known. He also named *diplopia*, the double-vision of things-as-they-are versus things-as-we think-they-are (or want them to be, or will them to be).

This affliction arose, he believed, because our expectations are extravagant: "beyond the limits of reason or

moderation," especially "our power to shape the world." The *actual* world, that is, which has its limits. So we develop a "synthetic reality." He provides much history, e.g. of the "graphic revolution," which molded both expectations of reality and of its immediate availability. The book was published, not yesterday but in 1962.

Two chapters remain particularly timely: From Ideal to Image: From the American Dream to American Illusions?: the Self-deceiving Magic of Prestige and The Search for Self-Fulfilling Prophecies. In the latter, after noting the subjectivizing of basic values (no longer 'ideals', like stars by which to navigate), he observes, "the life in America which I have described is a . . . sport in which we ourselves make the props and are the sole performers." Thus our appetite for "made news, synthetic heroes, prefabricated tourist attractions, homogenized interchangeable forms of art. . . ." Finally, "what dominates American experience today is not reality."

Who among us could not supply dozens of examples? My own, cherry-picked from the trivial to the tragic, are: that Muhammad Ali is the greatest fighter of all time, rather than a gifted athlete who bamboozled judges and the public alike into confusing sizzle for pugilistic steak; that teachers' unions care most about students, rather than the material benefits of their members; that Black Lives Matter is a civil rights organization whose very name shouts for justice, rather than a neo-Stalinist, virophobic, anti-Semitic hate group; that *our country has never been more divided than it is now*, when in fact it has not been more *evenly* and *intolerantly* divided (except, of course, for the Civil War).

I know I've picked a few fights. Lies aside (when asked about his lie regarding Mitt Romney not paying taxes, Harry Reid's *public* response was, "it worked, didn't it?"), my point and Boorstin's may be yesterday's news: perceptual deceptions arise from highly manipulable technologies (these

days 'influencers' and Tweeters seem to call the shots for what passes as public opinion), as well as from old-fashioned mislabeling. People simply do not pay attention to the difference between what something is *called* (e.g. Affordable Health Care Act) and what it *is* (a Rube Goldberg rig that disempowers the individual in favor of the state). Before Alinsky dedicated his book to Satan there was Uncle Screwtape: both new that corruption begins with language.

A second older book still with some currency, if we make certain adjustments (replacing TV with the Web, for example), is worth mentioning: Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1981). Slogans gain *resonance* more quickly and widely than ever before, so that we are governed by bumper-sticker thinking, and entertainment becomes the supra-ideology of all discourse. That is, news becomes a type of "anti-communication," abandoning "logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction."

Postman goes on, "in the parlance of the theater, it is known as vaudeville." Later he quotes Robert MacNeil, who writes that the idea is "to keep everything brief, not to strain the attention but . . . to provide constant stimulation through variety, novelty, action, and movement . . . a substitute for thought."

Do ideas from two old books make for insights that speak to us now? Here is a thought from a newer book (2014), Theodore Dalrymple's *Threats of Pain and Ruin*. Dalrymple notes a consequence of the phenomenon described by Boorstin and Postman. "We live in an age of the convenience of the moment" (what a resonant phrase, that). "We do not build *sub specie aeternitatis*, because we do not believe in eternity of any kind . . . Thus the ugliness of modern Europe . . . is the ugliness of a society in which people believe in nothing but their standard of living . . . It is the ugliness of civilizational exhaustion."

Moreover, except for superficial 'communities' consisting of 'friends,' transient common interests, demographic features, or (now) some affront (e.g. victimhood), every man (and woman, and otherwise) *is* an island. There is no world but mine, the one that makes me *feel*. Diplopia—my world of emotions, sometimes no more than a twitch of Tourette's, *is* the world—became the default epistemological mode, now implicit and so unnoticed.

One can state a fact—"my black students are under-performing," moaned a colleague, seeking some solution—and be made to apologize for stating it. One can wonder at the color of a newborn-to-be—I've heard married African-American students ask that question about theirs—and be, pardon the expression, blackballed.

That history and historical thinking, the source of cultural identity, is a fatality of diplopia hardly needs saying. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Czeslaw Milosz noted "our refusal to remember," and Bill Moyers (no favorite of mine) gets it just right: "We Americans seem to know everything about the last twenty-four hours but very little of the last sixty centuries or the last sixty years," which then allows for all sorts of fraudulence.

Very well then. Axiomatically: Unreality works and always has, effectively warping public discourse and decision-making. But wherefore its saturation and penetration into the very psyches of whole populations? Something more fundamental to our lives—more insidious because more personal than politics, policies, and programs—is at work, a collapse towards which Dalrymple has gestured.

In the late Fifties and early Sixties we became, an adolescent country. Baby Boomers met, first puberty, then Elvis, then the Beatles, with LSD along the way—and Woodstock assured that they would never grow all the way up. Thereupon arose that imperium, the Hegemonic Self, for *what else is an*

adolescent?

Feelings came to rule. And why not? They are *democratic* (who doesn't have feelings?), *dynamic* (they provide action), they are *mine*, and *they are beyond dispute*. That led *directly* to the *erosion of persuasion* (as well as most ethical restraints that ordinarily accompany it), which came to be mistaken for imposition: who am I to tell some other Self what to believe—or, worse, *feel*? And with the death of persuasion (“by sweetness,” etymologically) came entropy.

Still, though, there must be more to the affliction, some vacuity wider, deeper, emptier than my Theory of the Adolescent American. Here I boil it down to one word, *Inauthenticity*. Back in the fifties a child could help Winkie Dink cross a chasm by drawing a bridge on a plastic sheet fixed to the TV screen: the child was a *participant—the child thought*. Social and all media intensify that inauthenticity exponentially.

But now for the *peripeteia* in our tragedy: very many people are intuiting their *loss of agency* and look to anyone who promises to give it back, *no matter the Unreality of the promise*. And with that *identity* comes the restoration of a sense—but only a sense—of *belonging*. In favor of a new inauthentic ‘reality’, we, ourselves inauthentic, bid farewell to a culture, including its history, commonly held—except for its schizophrenia, into which diplopia inevitably devolves. It is personal; that is, it is *in* the person, the individual: a diplopia that then extends to entropic cultural, social, and political grievances.

The inauthenticity spreads, until, like old, stained wallpaper, it seems part of an overall design. How many people do you know who do *not* play to a *persona* of their own creation, a precious ‘self-image’ (often to be ‘re-invented’), a virtually genomic inauthenticity? (But that’s for another essay.)

Maybe I'm simply re-inventing the wheel of Existential Despair, or following Dr. Johnson's advice that "people need to be reminded more often than instructed." Pick one. What I do know is that the outer world often reflects the inner, symptomatically, that inauthenticity of Self makes for inauthentic families, communities, societies, nations and worlds. To paraphrase Dalrymple, we have *psychical* exhaustion.

One antidote, I suppose, is "know thyself," thy genuine Psyche, that is, and, without sacrificing courtesy or mutual respect, be true to it. Or I can point to another anti-toxin, by way of a third book, this one very recent, Anthony Esolen's *Sex and the Unreal City: The Demolition of the Western Mind* (2020). When discussing an aspect of Eric Voegelin's thought, he summarizes the three stages of *negation* (new to me, and welcome): deception; awareness of *but persistence in* the deception; and finally the motive of "the swindle" being a revolt against God. He opens his chapter on Genesis by marking the first figure of speech in the Bible (a rhyme of *vohu* with *tohu*), leading to the clincher: "the earth was without form, and void" actually denotes "inanity," "nonbeing."

Unreality, we see—whether political, social, cultural, or personal—is *moronic*. And its opposite, Authenticity, has one and only one source, which does not lie within this space-time continuum. Thus to distinguish the seeming from the being.

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