

Carnival of Distractions 6

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The debasement of our public discourse has involved the on-going degeneration of our thinking. This degeneration has led to the severe deterioration of (genuine) democracy. A society of total spectacle (in which entertainment becomes device for maintaining the incumbent power structures) can't sustain a participatory, deliberative democracy.

In a society that clamors to watch programming like "Good Morning America" and "Today" and "Oprah" and "Access Hollywood" and "Entertainment Tonight" and "Inside Edition" and "Regis & Kelly" and other mindless chit-chat shows, is it any wonder that we've become so intellectually malnourished? Reality TV has perhaps an even more severe effect.

Such inane—yet eminently captivating—distractions are largely to blame for the sad state of our beleaguered democracy. Yet few have made this connection. Such media fare is utterly vacuous, yet eminently addictive. It is a dysfunction—but it is a dysfunction with which tens of millions have become thoroughly infatuated.

This social trend can be primarily attributed to the fact that citizens are now primarily seen (and treated) as consumers, as spectators...and ALL things—including healthcare and education—are increasingly treated as consumer products. We want public officials to be **BUSINESSMEN**, not statesmen...if we even bother to make the distinction. Public service and civic mindedness have become anathema. We care more about fashionable consumption than about social responsibility. We'd rather be trendy than civically engaged. We'd rather be "hip" than erudite. In the culture industry, supply happily meets this demand. Edification doesn't sell. Anything requiring cognitive exertion is bad for business.

Civic-minded-ness makes no sense in this milieu. We're not supposed to care whether or not the kid down the street has good healthcare or has access to a quality education. We're told that "freedom" is about everyone fending for themselves in a draconian marketplace. Politicians have corporate sponsors. Influence and voice is proportional to wealth. We call systematic bribery, "lobbying". And we call corporations "people".

When money is speech and corporations are given civil rights, when there is legalized graft, when legislation is for sale to the highest bidder, then plutocracy is the inevitable outcome. When government is run like a business...and opportunist businessmen are confused for public servants...and the citizenry remains chronically distracted (and thus egregiously ill-informed)...then genuine democracy can no longer exist.

When the gutting of vital social services and the de-funding of basic public infrastructure is called "small government" or "austerity" as if such measures were a virtue... when "you're on your own" is rephrased as "individual liberty"... when measures the State takes to **EMPOWER** people are re-labeled "government control over your lives"... when miserliness is called "prosperity" and

avarice is called “ambition” and affluence is called “success”... and when “freedom” means only caring about you and your own... then people will flee democracy and run into the arms of plutocrats in the name of “freedom”.

The point, here, is that a primary way to control people (and exploit them with impunity) is to persuade them to focus on the wrong sorts of things. Let’s survey ten colossal lies told by U.S. presidents since the 60’s that have done extensive harm to human society:

The “domino theory” of “communism” (specifically in southeast Asia and Latin America)

- I’m ending the war in Vietnam.
- They hate us for our freedom.
- I didn’t authorize trading arms to Iran to help the contras in Nicaragua
- Clarence Thomas is qualified to be anything more than a fourth grade civics teacher.
- Sadaam Hussein has WMDs.
- The war on drugs is working.
- Trickle down economics will eventually happen.
- Regulation / oversight / transparency / accountability (ROTA) of the private sector inhibits free enterprise, discourages entrepreneurship, and somehow hurts the economy.
- If we privatize everything under the sun, we will all be more “free”.

ALL these lies are neglected. The ONE lie that 10’s of millions couldn’t get over, though, was the following: “That woman didn’t give me a blow job.”

It is priorities like this that have done untold damage to America. When Goldman Sachs profited off securitized sub-prime home mortgages while betting against the housing market, many didn’t address the horrifically dysfunctional system that allowed such malfeasance to occur. When a man was illegitimately installed as president of the United States after a fraudulent election in Florida in 2000, nothing was done. YET...A man was impeached for not wanting to announce to the public that he received a hummer from an intern.

So 10’s of millions know who won the ball-game last night, yet they think zygotes are humans, homosexuality is a bad thing, and that the second amendment is still relevant. They are fully apprised of the names of all the people on each Reality TV show, yet insist that corporations should be treated as people and that money should be treated as “speech”. These are the same people who are still under the impression that supply-side economics has any credence...and that organized labor is antithetical to democracy.

A democracy can’t exist with such epidemic ignorance.

Behold the cover of the March 2012 issue of *Glamour* magazine:

- **Everything you want to know about sex**
- **Guilt-free shopping**
- **Easy beauty**
- **Lots of guys**

- **Plus hot insider gossip**

No kidding. THAT was the cover. Whether one finds this hilarious or disturbing, there is little doubt that it encapsulates American pop culture quite well. THIS is what tens of millions of people are concerning themselves with on a daily basis.

Much of what is dysfunctional about our country is illustrated each week on covers like this. (For what it's worth, my theory is that people learn about sex not from reading magazines, but by having sex with partners they genuinely care about.) What are we concerned with on a daily basis (other than our jobs and standard domestic chores)? Tragically, this list of five topics just about covers it for many people. (What do we MEAN by "beauty"? Is it a good sign when it's SHOPPING we're most concerned about feeling "guilty" about? And is gossip that much better when it comes from "insiders"?)

WHAT ARE WE READING?:

To elucidate the sad state of our commercial media, consider this: In 2009, the three top-selling non-novel books were absurdist polemics by three radical right-wing charlatans (Glenn Beck, Sarah Palin, and Mark Levin). Actually, TWO of the ten non-novel bestsellers that year were by Glenn Beck.

Let that sink in for a moment.

This statistic does not bode well for our public discourse. Also consider that the biggest-selling non-novel book of the past generation is Rick Warren's "The Purpose Driven Life"—a piece of pulp trash so awful as to boggle the mind. Meanwhile, the biggest-selling book of 2007 (and then the 5th biggest seller in 2008) was a ridiculous sham ("The Secret").

What's going on here?

Most of the other best sellers each year fall into one of four categories: diet gimmicks, low-brow memoirs, right-wing propaganda, and stories of people going to heaven. This is, to put it mildly, very disturbing. But these unsettling stats tell us something about American culture: People are searching—in desperation—for hope...even if it's false hope. They will cling to whatever is marketable...no matter how much delusion it may involve. Why? They are groping for something—ANYTHING—to hold on to.

Case in point: "True stories" of Christian-infused NDE is a booming business these days. When people are frustrated, searching in desperation for something to hold on to, yearning for better days ahead, in need of something to look forward to, and hankering for consolation / solace, they are often eager to believe fantastical things. When people crave hope, they often will "buy" whoever is selling it (even if it is false hope). When people crave certainty, they will often "buy" whoever is selling it (even if it is false certainty). The NDE gimmick exploits these human penchants in extremely lucrative ways.

BY FAR, the best-selling (non-fiction) book of 2011 was "Heaven Is for Real"—a preposterous piece of trash-pulp based on the (temporary) adventures of a 4-year-old boy in heaven.

(Predictably, its sequel was released this year.) In 2010, it was “The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven”. In 2009 it was “Evidence of the Afterlife”. In 2008 it was “Glimpses Of Heaven”. In 2007 it was “90 Minutes In Heaven”. In 2006 it was “Life After Death” (written by notorious charlatan, Deepak Chopra). And in 2003, it was a book entitled, “Heaven Is So Real”.

In 2012, the cavalcade of trash-pulp on “heaven” and the afterlife continued with Eben Alexander’s “Proof of Heaven”—a book that (tragically) made it to the top of the New York Times best-seller list. A woman named Mary C. Neal also got in on the action—with her own “near-death experience” (NDE) account. The next year, in 2013, it was “Waking Up In Heaven”... as well as a fire & brimstone publication of a book called, “Heaven Is Real But So Is Hell”. Everyone and their mother is now cashing in on the “HEAVEN REALLY EXISTS” gimmick...and tens of millions of Americans are eagerly gobbling it up.

This NDE-craze is more than a passing trend. For over a decade now, NDE balderdash has sold like hotcakes—every year, year after year—to a credulous readership. But WHY? The movie, “The Island” provides the explanation. “The Island” was a parable that provided the perfect illustration of how people can be subdued EN MASSE. In the story, we saw that the “powers that be” found an ingenious way to control people...and to keep them placated. It’s actually quite simple: Give the rabble something fantastic to look forward to, something wonderful to hope for, an alleged “final destination” for which they might strive...and to which they may devote their lives.

For that existential “carrot” is what makes it ALL worthwhile. Provide the rabble with such an enticing vision...and they’ll be putty in your hands. The Catholic Church mastered this gimmick...and used it century after century after century with astounding success. Plutocrats in modern society employ some version of the “American Dream”. Touted are alluring images of a life of glamour and splendour...a life that might be just around the corner for ALL of us...if only we keep our heads down and cater to The Machine. “If you want THIS...well, then, you better play your cards right!” we are notified by the authorities. Naturally, the response is: “Really? Well, then gosh-golly, I better play my cards right! Pray tell: Instruct me as to HOW to play my cards. I will do so, and thank you for showing me the way.” Thus, not only do the rabble willingly play along...they THANK the powers that be for the FAVOR.

Just like right-wing propaganda (or any other piece of charlatanism), Alexander’s book preys on the credulity of its target audience. He is shamelessly cashing in on a hot market opportunity—as is his publisher, Simon & Schuster. As it turns out, Alexander is a fraud. (We can thank Sam Harris for doing two very good articles critiquing Alexander’s shameful publication.) But no matter: when people WANT to believe strongly enough, they will believe...and they will believe ALMOST ANYTHING. It’s how right-wing propaganda has worked since time immemorial. This is why tens of millions of Americans are duped into supporting, say, right-wing economic policy—policies that CLEARLY screw them over while only helping the privileged few.

Meanwhile, the very best non-fiction books each year (the most important books to read in order to procure erudition) generally don’t even make the year’s top 40 best-selling “non-fiction” list. This is nothing short of a tragedy. (One might imagine the impact it would have had if the millions who read the top 10 non-novel sellers each year had instead read the MIBYs.)

The degree to which pulp has degenerated is demonstrated every week by the so-called “non-fiction” best-seller lists. Most people read trash pulp...and neglect the few gems that are

published each year (typically, to minimal fanfare). The few notable exceptions prove the rule.

One can tell a lot about a culture by what most of the people spend their time reading. Here in America, the trends are tremendously disconcerting.