

The Propaganda Hologram

by Bill Herbst

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First off, I can't claim to have coined the phrase that is the title of this commentary. The late, great Joe Bageant wrote of the "American hologram" of consumer enslavement. Others have used the Matrix-like notion of a false reality hologram to describe the state of modern civilization, especially in America. All I've done is to tack on the word "propaganda" as an adjective to better describe the nature and function of this alluring, damn-near all-encompassing deception.

The 1956 Don Siegel-directed sci-fi B-movie, **Invasion of the Body Snatchers**, starring a very young Kevin McCarthy and an equally young Dana Wynter — is now considered something of a cult classic among sci-fi movie buffs, so much so that it has been remade by Hollywood three times — in 1978, 1993, and 2007. The original flick's allegory has been the subject of much speculation, interpreted sometimes as a cautionary tale about the Joe McCarthy-era Red-menace, Communist-under-every-bed hysteria of the early 1950s Cold War years. Daniel Mainwaring, the writer of the original screenplay, however, stated in an interview that the motivation and subtext for his script was the danger of conformity in the burgeoning consumer culture. Go figure.

In much the same way that President Dwight D. Eisenhower's justly famous 1961 farewell TV address to the American public went unheeded, in which the outgoing chief of state warned of the increasing influence of a "*military-industrial-commercial complex*" and the dangers posed to American society by the growing Deep State, so too the implicit warning in **Invasion of the Body Snatchers** about consumer culture did nothing to limit or derail what was to come.

As I have written on numerous occasions and continue to believe, the great triumph of modern psychology in the 20th century was *not* in the arena of therapy. Instead, it occurred in the field of effective propaganda to achieve mass mind control. Basically, modern psychology's insights into human nature were invested most productively into advertising (I might use the term "co-opted into advertising," but what happened was more natural and inevitable than conspiratorial or underhanded).

Advertisers had long understood that their challenge was not merely to inform the buying public about the availability of the products they represented, but

actually to create the desire for those products in the minds, hearts, and loins of consumers.

Human desire is insatiable. Sure, we may temporarily quench our passions and cool the heat of desire, but they tend to return later. If we are hungry, we can barely think about anything else until that want or need to eat has been satisfied, after which we are satiated for awhile. But within hours that desire will return, as strong as ever. So, at one level life becomes a perpetual quest to scratch the itch of desire. This alternating pattern is why payment for goods and services is often requested (or required) *before* delivery of those goods and services — because after we get them we are less motivated to pay, at least until we want them again or want more of something else.

So, advertising is primarily about manipulation of others through their desire nature, by fostering (or even implanting/creating) desires. Any way that can be achieved is fair game. Marketing departments often have few scruples about truthfully presenting the virtues of products. If fictions and lies are effective in convincing people to buy — which they are — then using fictions and lies in the arsenal of manipulations is fine by them. The bottom line for advertisers is almost never a better world, but rather increased sales and profits. If we peer deeply enough into the heart of civilization, we find the acquisition of money as a primary motivator. That's not news to anyone who's paying attention, but it's worth remembering.

Lest my readers conclude that I am anti-business, let me re-state my belief that commerce is the very life-blood of human society. The easier, more convenient fulfillment of wants and needs is a core reason why we live in groups. Yes, we are a social species with a biological need to cluster around others of our kind, but we tend not to reside in cities and neighborhoods because we love our neighbors. No, we like to be able to get whatever stuff we want without too much trouble.

So, I'm all for commerce. What I'm not a fan of is predatory capitalism, which has been with us for a long time, but has expanded over the past 150 years to the point where it now dominates the economic landscape. The result is that the primary and often sole concern of businesses is maximization of financial profits, pretty much to the exclusion of any other values. In that system, the costs of doing business are not only calculated falsely but off-loaded onto society whenever and wherever possible. This is sometimes achieved through accounting trickery, but more often it is simply the *de facto* accepted agreement about how we will conduct commerce, meaning that laws on the books favor and reward such calculations.

Not only are those practices selfish and inhumane, but — at our current gigantic levels of commercial enterprise — the routine failure to recognize and account for the actual costs of business imperils our very future as a viable species. The

theft of wealth through corruption cannot go on forever without dire consequences to civilization as a whole, to the well-being of the human population, and to the health of the planet, even though too many people in charge seem to feel that the status quo is just fine. I'm not sure what they're thinking, but they clearly don't see reality and our future the way I do.

The Onslaught of Advertising

One hallmark of modern civilization is that we are surrounded by advertising — immersed in it, bathed in a constant barrage of media pressure to want certain things.

Take television, for instance. The industry of television — over-the-air, cable, satellite, broadband streaming, and all the various networks — exists not to provide content, but to capture consumers. The content, meaning the shows we watch, are the bait on the hook. We are the fish being trolled for, caught, and harvested by and for advertisers.

In the 1960s, a typical television program contained 51 minutes of content and nine minutes of ads. Today that ratio has changed to 41 minutes of content and 19 minutes of ads. Surf through however many channels you have on your TV, stopping at each channel for only a second or two, and you're likely to see mostly ads. Depending on the time in the hour that you do this, you may see almost all ads. This is one reason among many that some people have given up mainstream (i.e., broadcast) TV entirely, since they don't wish to be assaulted by advertising. For those who want to watch *something*, however, that strategy may have diminishing returns, since the internet is now being taken over by advertising.

Data Mining

Over my lifetime (and yours), data collection about our behavior as consumers has grown into a huge industry, one that gets bigger, more encompassing, more sophisticated (and, I would suggest, more inhumane) every day. Brave New World is upon us.

Do you ever wonder why, when you go to any commercial website that sells advertising space as part of its revenue stream, the ads that appear on the pages are all seemingly for products similar to what you've shopped for or purchased online in the past? Because of data collection about your personal history of internet/web use and buying history. "They" (cyber-marketing companies — Google and the like, in what is becoming a crowded field of very big businesses) capture every keystroke and mouse click we make. They know everywhere we've been online and everything we've bought, and they've developed extraordinarily complex algorithms to keep new but familiar consumer carrots in front of our donkeys. Friends, this is the future, and it's going to be

much more prevalent and far-reaching in the years and decades ahead. We are entering (and already well into) an age that heralds the Death of Privacy. But that's a different essay...

Advertising of consumer products is only one facet of The Propaganda Hologram, just a sub-section of the larger dimension of manipulation. The Propaganda Hologram is not just about consumer products. It's about influencing and shaping everything we believe, and without much regard for whether what we believe is true or not.

Manufacturing Public Consent

A larger dimension of the Hologram is aimed at what Noam Chomsky termed "manufacturing consent." Basically, the 20th century produced the realization that control of the whatever story is told about a given set of events is immensely powerful in shaping public opinion, and that repetition of a given narrative is effective in getting people (i.e., the masses) to believe whatever that narrative says. Repeat a story often enough, and it becomes truth in the public mind.

The Nazi Third Reich in Germany during the 1930s is often cited as a regime that exercised a mastery of propaganda to shape public opinion, with particular attention paid to the documentary, "*Triumph of the Will*," made at Hitler's request by Leni Riefenstahl. The documentary, recording the 1935 Nuremberg rally of the Nazi Party, is frequently singled out as a significant landmark in the development of film as an effective medium of mass propaganda.

During the War in Vietnam during the 1960s, on-the-scene reporting by TV and print journalists had a major effect in challenging the U.S. military's narrative and promoting fierce public debate about the wisdom of the war, much to the chagrin of the government. By the time of the first Iraq War (Desert Storm) in the early 1990s, the military had learned the lesson about tightly controlling the narrative. Journalists had to be "embedded," which tended to squelch alternative perspectives and points of view. By the second Iraq War — the invasion of Iraq in 2004 — the science of narrative control had been, if not totally perfected, at least locked firmly in place. Anti-invasion voices of dissent still existed, of course, but they were marginalized by being largely barred from exposure in the mainstream media.

As we move further into the 21st century, the battle to control the narratives fed to (and believed by) the public will become more intense.

Saturn-Neptune and Fake News

We are slogging through a period where competition between conflicting narratives has exploded into a virtual Tower of Babel, especially through the

increasing impact of the internet. This has been termed “fake news,” a phenomenon that astrology accounts for particularly well.

(I wrote about the Saturn-Neptune transit in an earlier commentary during the 2016 presidential election campaign — <http://www.billherbst.com/Comm33.pdf> — but it’s worth reiterating here, since this commentary’s subject makes relevant another visit to the astrology of that significant and still ongoing event.)

From our perspective on earth, Saturn and Neptune have a 36-year cycle around the ecliptic or zodiac. Every nine years, the two planets form a significant angular relationship — conjoined at the beginning of the cycle, at right angles (twice, at the 1/4 and 3/4 marks of the cycle), and opposite each other at the halfway point. Each time the cycle changes phase, moving from one quarter to the next, a period occurs where the conflicting symbolism of the two planets is accentuated, often dramatically.

Saturn in astrology is the symbol for physical reality — hard, cold realism. It’s the planet of boundaries, of the clear distinction between one thing and another — *this* versus *that*. Saturn doesn’t care what we believe or want, it says, “*This is reality; deal with it.*”

Neptune, by contrast, symbolizes dreams and fantasies, whether as ideals or illusions. Neptune defies the laws of physics and denies all boundaries. It is the longing for a return to Oneness within the Infinite, where the apparent separateness of one thing versus another is wiped away.

Saturn is contracting; Neptune is expanding. Needless to say, whenever they align in significant ways, the resulting manifestations are more than a little phantasmagorical. Life as we knew it becomes exaggerated and dream-like.

The entire 36-year Saturn-Neptune cycle always tells us where reality will be altered by dreams and fantasies. Below are the periods of the past three Saturn-Neptune cycles and their general symbolic meaning:

1916–1951: The Saturn-Neptune cycle began in Leo and symbolized an exaggeration of patriotism and nationalism, played out through the First and Second World Wars.

1952–1987: The Saturn-Neptune cycle began in Libra and symbolized an exaggerated accentuation of social equality, harmony, and the longing for justice. This period included the Civil Rights movement and the rise of Feminism and gender rebalancing.

1988-2024: The Saturn-Neptune cycle began in Capricorn and symbolized the disintegration of traditions and institutions, as well as wildly exaggerated finances in economics. The cycle began with

the breakup of the Soviet Union, which so puffed up America that we adopted completely looney-tunes economics. Now, however, we are facing massive loss of faith in our traditions and institutions, most particularly in government.

(The next Saturn-Neptune cycle will begin in 2025 in Aries and will symbolically represent a rebirth of both Individual Selfhood and the State. That cycle will take us past the mid-century mark to 2060.)

The precise technical alignments of each quarterly phase change in the Saturn-Neptune cycle are either one month long (for the rare single-pass transits) or ten months long (for the more common three-pass transits). Using 10° orbs (which are fairly standard in mundane astrology), each transit has an effective period of two years, with an occasionally longer transit of nearly three years.

The current Saturn-Neptune last-quarter square alignment is one of the longer transits. From November 2014 through October 2017, Saturn and Neptune are once again doing their dance together. This time they are perpendicular, forming a right angle of 90° , as they move into the final quarter of their current cycle. The transit represents a welling-up of the previous three decades of reality intertwining with fantasy in a final spasm of exaggerated illusions.

Who in 2014 would have given a snowball's chance in hell of Donald Trump's being elected President in 2016? Trump — snake-oil salesman that he is — benefitted immensely from the unusual tenor of these times. As it turned out, he was the right demagogue at the right time, a Pied Piper for the discontented. He appealed to a specific demographic of the electorate, namely, white voters from the middle and lower economic classes who felt betrayed and left behind by decades of financial shenanigans that stoked the coffers of the wealthy almost exclusively while squeezing the middle class. These voters had become profoundly mistrustful of mainstream American institutions, especially in politics. That's a significant manifestation of the Uranus-Pluto uprising that spans the entire decade.

Trump made hay also because of the Saturn-Neptune alignment. During a period such as this where reality cannot be easily distinguished from fantasy, whoever tells the best, most compelling, and seductive lies wins, at least temporarily. Trump's message of "America first" and "making the country great again" was a dream-like narrative that appealed to a significant portion of voters — not technically a majority, but enough to swing the vote in certain crucial states.

At the same time, Hillary Clinton's "stronger together" theme ran completely counter to the prevailing zeitgeist. That was the wrong message for these troubled times. In blunt terms, Clinton represented a continuation of the status quo. Certainly the powers-that-be and the Deep State will strive to keep the status quo in place no matter who is President, but many ordinary Americans

wanted to hear another story, and they got it from Trump. The fact that coal miner's jobs are not actually coming back didn't matter one whit, as long as the narrative was pleasing to the ex-coal miners.

When Saturn and Neptune are aligned, a period of scandals often results, since Neptune is often deceptive, at least in our experience of the symbol. Things are almost never what they seem during periods when Neptune is emphasized, and especially during Saturn-Neptune transits. During the election campaign, Clinton suffered scandals that may have been fatal to her candidacy, while the scandals that beset Trump were washed away by the effectiveness of his (fictional) narrative. Fake news was a significant factor in what brought down Hillary and propelled the Donald to victory.

Now that Trump is President, however, he is much less bullet-proof. The scandals that he sidestepped during the election campaign may still come home to roost. Is "Russiagate" a real or fake scandal? Astrology suggests that there's no way to tell at this point.

What's Next?

Will we return to "normal reality" after the Saturn-Neptune alignment moves beyond 10° orb and fades out after October of 2017? I doubt it. Transits come and go, but their symbolic correspondences in actual manifestation tend to have lasting repercussions. Over the next nine years, however, as the current Saturn-Neptune cycle comes to a close, we will gradually have to let go of our apparent victories and defeats, our seeming successes and failures, and learn to deal with new and potentially harsh realities that would have been unimaginable in the last century.

What I'm relatively certain about is that The Propaganda Hologram isn't going away, at least not in the foreseeable future, and that the struggle for control of the narratives that influence and shape public opinion will continue and probably increase in intensity, if not always in subtlety or sophistication.

Consider our elected representatives on the national stage. We are living in an age where political double-speak (hardly a new phenomenon) is rampant. Politicians tell the public whatever they think it wants to hear, then turn around and propose from the White House or legislate in Congress the exact opposite of what they promised. Republicans are particularly skilled in this, in ways that are often particularly egregious and bald-faced, although the Democrats aren't too far behind. The presidencies of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama might as well be considered Republican administrations.

The collapse of civilization that is already underway will also continue, although whether it will accelerate or maintain its current pace of sporadic lurching into chaos is unknown. As our social institutions age and move into the narcissism of

old age, they're becoming less dependable, not more. As this occurs, the discontent and mistrust people feel, especially among those who benefit the least from institutions that are supposed to serve them but don't, is likely to grow.

The elites who run modern civilization have so far done an astonishing job of maintaining the illusions of business-as-usual and the status quo. The financial meltdown of 2008 came and went without so much as a hiccup. Now, nine years later, the same Wall Street and too-big-to-fail big bank racketeering schemes are continuing as wealth is funneled upwards toward the 1%. Apparently the rich won't be satisfied until they own and control everything.

How long the powers-that-be can continue to succeed in controlling the narrative is not something about which I have a prediction. They are, though, very smart and resourceful in ways that emphasize the short term, and I have no doubt that the elites will do whatever they decide is necessary to maintain their grip on the levers of power, however draconian such measures may become.

The Propaganda Hologram will continue to be among the primary tools of those who seek power and influence.