

A powerful book – much needed and not to be overlooked: by therapists, clients and the wider world.

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## Tweeting while Rome burns

**Hyper Normalisation** – A film by Adam Curtis, 166 mins, 2016, Jaye/Gorel, BBC iPlayer, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p04b183c/adam-curtis-hypernormalisation>

The world is going to hell in a filter bubble – or at least those parts of it mesmerized by the internet and, especially, social media. We are tweeting while Rome burns. Meanwhile, the rest of the world – where reality takes place – harbours ‘festering’ and ‘mutating’ forces, arising from the West’s simplistic foreign policies, which, for several decades, have focused on God-blessed America and her allies ridding the planet – or the Middle East at least – of despots. After which democracy will naturally flourish.

Except, of course, it doesn’t. And Iraq and many of the ‘Arab Spring’ countries are in chaotic turmoil, riven by the proliferation of ‘the poor man’s nuclear bomb’: suicide bombers, who multiplied after theological sleight of hand transformed forbidden suicide into sanctified martyrdom.

And no one, apart presumably from those organizing and executing these acts of incendiary insurrection, has any ‘vision of a different or better future’.

It is with these damning words that Adam Curtis’s latest mega-documentary ‘HyperNormalisation’ begins, echoing the closing sentiments of his last, ‘Bitter Lake’: ‘What is needed is a new story, and one that we can believe in’.

‘HyperNormalisation’ is a bad trip of a film, and having ingested 166 minutes of Sandoz-quality, pure ADAM C, there is no coming down: things are not getting better, despite what Yuval Noah Harari says in his 2011 book *Sapiens*, where the reduction in international warfare and famine is highlighted. The only way is not up. The art of politics has largely been abandoned: ‘the end of a dream that politics could change the world’. And it is true that politicians who actually believe in change – Jeremy Corbyn springs to mind – are often viewed as dangerous. So ‘managed outcomes’ are all that can be expected. Trying to minimize risk in the face of environmental disasters, climate change and war conducted on a small and individual scale through suicide bombing. How can peace negotiations take place when the populace is too frightened to venture out in the streets, asks Curtis of the Israel-Palestine situation.

It all seems to have started in 1975, when Henry Kissinger was seeking to establish balance in the interconnected system he perceived the world to be, thereby enabling a truly global society. At the same time, Hafiz al Assad – the father of the current Syrian leader – was seeking to develop stability in the Middle East, to enable the Arab world to stand up to the West. He saw that Palestinian refugees must be allowed to return to their homeland to establish

peace between Israel and the Arab world. Kissinger, in turn, worried about the growth of Arab power, and saw that dividing them would prevent this, deeming the Palestinian dilemma irrelevant, but concealing this through double-dealing and 'constructive ambiguity'.

Assad was furious when he discovered this, warning Kissinger that he had released 'demons'. He retreated, licking his wounds and nursing a brutal and vengeful mindset.

In the same year, in New York, the banks refused to bail out the indebted city, until City Hall caved in, allowing all but one place on the board of governors to be filled by bankers who promptly imposed a regime of austerity, sacking public employees – teachers, cops – in vast numbers. The era of political negotiation was over. This, of course, was the advent of what was to become Reaganomics, Thatcherism in the UK, monetarism internationally. The logic of the market would prevail.

Patti Smith and other radicals of the time moved away from identifying with political movements, and towards individual expression, seeking instead to 'change people's heads'. The revolution was deferred and money crept in, in the form of Donald Trump who, given massive tax breaks by the city, bought up derelict buildings to convert them into luxury apartments. New York was to become a city for the rich.

Alongside monetarism, the inauguration of former Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan as US president heralded a new simplicity in American foreign policy: 'God has placed the destiny of afflicted mankind into the hands of the United States. God bless America'.

US forces duly entered Beirut as peacekeepers following the massacre, by a Christian-Lebanese faction abetted by Israeli troops' passive consent, of thousands of Palestinian refugees in camps in Sabra. However, Assad was convinced of a different reality to this presence, and in alliance with Ayatollah Khomeini, the policy of suicide bombing was initiated, individuals destroying themselves to promote Islamic revolution, in an ultimate act of penitence exceeding self-flagellation. In the Iran-Iraq conflict, schoolchildren were bussed out to walk through Iraqi minefields, and hallowed as martyrs with fountains spurting blood-red water.

The suicide bomber is described by Curtis as an unstoppable human weapon. And indeed, they prevailed when Reagan felt obliged to withdraw his troops after US Marine barracks were targeted by suicide bombers acting for Hezbollah – Iranians under Syrian control – killing 241 soldiers in 1983. The US was paralysed by the complexity of what it faced in the Middle East.

A solution of sorts emerged in the shape of Colonel Gaddafi, who was repeatedly framed by US intelligence as the villain of the piece, a 'fake terrorist mastermind': a role with which Gaddafi was only too happy to collude in his bid for global fame. This was in the face of rebuttals by other intelligence agencies, who repeatedly stressed that Syria was the culprit. Even after doubts were raised by the American 'intelligence community', Libya, identified as a 'rogue state', was bombed in 1986. This avoided the complexities of going after Syria, as Gaddafi was rejected by other Arab leaders, who saw him as 'mad'.

So. Pause for breath. Because there are other strands that Curtis has woven in by this point: the decay and demise of the Soviet Union and the rise of computers, and what science fiction writer William Gibson dubbed 'cyberspace' in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*.

The title 'HyperNormalisation' derives from the last days of Soviet empire, Curtis tells us, when the fabric of the state has become a hollow façade proclaiming that all is as it should be: we swoon over an ice-skating tournament where first prize appears to be a gleaming Lada (an East German car of notorious unreliability). And the proletariat complies with this pretence ... who can blame them when all that awaited them post-Perestroika was the chaos of kleptocracy and oligarchs ago-go, presiding over a collapsed economy, suffering like an asthmatic awaiting the annunciation of Vlad the Inhaler, the first of the neo-nostalgic 'strong man' leaders, trusted to recreate a better future in the image of a better past, in whose wake follow

'celebrity tycoon' Donald Trump in the US, and the UK's bid for autonomy from the EU – if we can successfully waive the rules, we can once again rule the waves.

There are two rays of light in the general gloom, and the first of these is the story of Eliza, a computer program developed between 1964 and 1966 at the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory by Joseph Weizenbaum, modelled on Carl Rogers' person-centred approach to psychotherapy, somewhat crassly described by Curtis as 'famous for repeating back to his patients what they'd just said'. The footage of Eliza in action immediately reveals there's more to it than that, including expressions of sympathy. Eliza was a great success among staff at the laboratory, who found succour in their interfaces with her/it. Instead of drawing inspiration from this, Curtis casts doubt on its value, and identifies it as a foundation stone in the edifice of the filter bubbles that immerse us now – like, Matrix-lite – as we surrender to algorithms confirming our 'favourites' and, like birds of a feather, or latter-day *Sun/Mail/Times/Guardian* readers, seek reflections and reinforcements of our cherished beliefs.

I'm surprised that Curtis omits to mention the theory of the Spectacle, a means of distraction controlled and promoted by capitalism/the state, propounded by Situationist Guy Debord, who, in his 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle* cites the mass media as 'its most glaring superficial manifestation'. It seems to me that the mesmeric quality that Curtis attributes to the Net and social media is merely the most recent manifestation in a chain of distracting phenomena/ploys, going back at least to the 'bread and circuses' appeasements witheringly described so by satirical poet Juvenal in 'Satire X' (circa 100 AD). Where I thoroughly agree with him is in the identification of the suicide bomber as a truly new and destabilizing weapon. The phrase 'I could be run over by a bus' might be supplanted by 'I could be blown up by a suicide bomber'. Curtis remarks on criticism among Jihadists of the ramping up of the suicide bomb approach utilized on 9/11, due to the devastating scale of the response from the US and its coalition that it provoked. The rogue lorry has, of course, been added to this arsenal in 2016, in Nice, and, very recently, Berlin.

I am also struck by the parallels between Curtis's phrase 'politics without vision' and poet and men's leader Robert Bly's evocation of 'The Sibling Society' in his 1996 book of the same name, wherein he speaks of the demise of 'vertical thought', when '[a]dults regress towards adolescence; and adolescents – seeing that – have no desire to become adults. Few are able to imagine any genuine life coming from the vertical plane – tradition, religion, devotion'. He also speaks of the change in the US press, from a culture of access to one of aggression, one with which we are perhaps even more familiar in the UK, and his fears that this abandonment of verticality and concomitant respect for authority is a breeding ground for demagoguery. Prescient stuff, it would seem.

Regarding Curtis's style, I am reminded of the American artist Robert Rauschenberg, who I suppose can be pigeon-holed as a proto-Pop Artist, and his innovation of the 'combine': multiple images, juxtaposing the light and the dark, the malign and the benign, the strange and the familiar. Curtis's use of imagery, impressive in its range of sources, leans towards the dark. At one point he is clunkingly literal: when following the inter-title 'The Old System was Dying', he shows a coffin being lowered into the ground. He also shows us torchlight in dark woods, and I couldn't help thinking that he was drawing an analogy between 'The Blair Witch Project' and the ill-fated Blair-Bush project in Iraq.

Curtis's use of music is similarly eclectic and often captivating. The film ends with the song 'Standing Room Only', sung by Barbara Mandrell, a country paean to escapism. Kraftwerk and Shostakovich can also be heard.

And then there is Curtis's voice, guiding us through the post-truth miasma. He doesn't go about it like Paul Newman's character in 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof', screaming 'Mendacity! Mendacity!', but calmly and patiently walks us through it, perhaps more like Virgil escorting

Dante through the descending circles of Hell. His voice is authoritative and his arguments persuasive. My main caveat would be that he's given us too much – too many strands – to digest. But, of course, it's on the BBC's iPlayer, until 16 October 2017, and comes in five chapters, so doesn't have to be viewed in a single sitting. Nevertheless, even if I hadn't been writing this review, it's difficult to watch without feeling obliged to take notes.

I mentioned two rays of light in the darkness. The second, and quite moving, ray is the depiction of the 'human amplifier' created by the Occupy movement, by which whatever an individual says is repeated in unison by all within earshot, so that the entire multitude can share: 'each person autonomous, but organized into a network', as Curtis puts it.

I will leave the last words to Curtis, from his blog, writing about his film:

But there is another world outside. And the film shows dramatically how it is beginning to pierce into an over-simplified bubble. Forces that politicians tried to forget and bury 40 years ago – that were then left to fester and mutate – but which are now turning on us with a vengeful fury.

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