

America the Illiterate

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We live in two Americas. One America, now the minority, functions in a print-based, literate world. It can cope with complexity and has the intellectual tools to separate illusion from truth. The other America, which constitutes the majority, exists in a non-reality-based belief system. This America, dependent on skillfully manipulated images for information, has severed itself from the literate, print-based culture. It cannot differentiate between lies and truth. It is informed by simplistic, childish narratives and clichés. It is thrown into confusion by ambiguity, nuance and self-reflection. This divide, more than race, class or gender, more than rural or urban, believer or nonbeliever, red state or blue state, has split the country into radically distinct, unbridgeable and antagonistic entities.

There are over 42 million American adults, 20 percent of whom hold high school diplomas, who cannot read, as well as the 50 million who read at a fourth- or fifth-grade level. Nearly a third of the nation's population is illiterate or barely literate. And their numbers are growing by an estimated 2 million a year. But even those who are supposedly literate retreat in huge numbers into this image-based existence. A third of high school graduates, along with 42 percent of college graduates, never read a book after they finish school. Eighty percent of the families in the United States last year did not buy a book.

The illiterate rarely vote, and when they do vote they do so without the ability to make decisions based on textual information. American political campaigns, which have learned to speak in the comforting epistemology of images, eschew real ideas and policy for cheap slogans and reassuring personal narratives. Political propaganda now masquerades as ideology. Political campaigns have become an experience. They do not require cognitive or self-critical skills. They are designed to ignite pseudo-religious feelings of euphoria, empowerment and collective salvation. Campaigns that succeed are carefully constructed psychological instruments that manipulate fickle public moods, emotions and impulses, many of which are subliminal. They create a public ecstasy that annuls individuality and fosters a state of mindlessness. They thrust us into an eternal present. They cater to a nation that now lives in a state of permanent amnesia. It is style and story, not content or history or reality, which inform our politics and our lives. We prefer happy illusions. And it works because so much of the American electorate, including those who should know better, blindly cast ballots for slogans, smiles, the cheerful family tableaux, narratives and the perceived sincerity and the attractiveness of candidates. We confuse how we feel with knowledge.

The illiterate and semi-literate, once the campaigns are over, remain powerless. They still cannot protect their children from dysfunctional public schools. They still cannot understand predatory loan deals, the intricacies of mortgage papers, credit card agreements and equity lines of credit that drive them into foreclosures and bankruptcies. They still struggle with the most basic chores of daily life from reading instructions on medicine bottles to filling out bank forms, car loan documents and unemployment benefit and insurance papers. They watch helplessly and without comprehension as hundreds of thousands of jobs are shed. They are hostages to brands. Brands come with images and slogans. Images and slogans are all they understand. Many eat at fast food restaurants not only because it is cheap but because they can order from pictures rather than menus. And those who

serve them, also semi-literate or illiterate, punch in orders on cash registers whose keys are marked with symbols and pictures. This is our brave new world.

Political leaders in our post-literate society no longer need to be competent, sincere or honest. They only need to appear to have these qualities. Most of all they need a story, a narrative. The reality of the narrative is irrelevant. It can be completely at odds with the facts. The consistency and emotional appeal of the story are paramount. The most essential skill in political theater and the consumer culture is artifice. Those who are best at artifice succeed. Those who have not mastered the art of artifice fail. In an age of images and entertainment, in an age of instant emotional gratification, we do not seek or want honesty. We ask to be indulged and entertained by clichés, stereotypes and mythic narratives that tell us we can be whomever we want to be, that we live in the greatest country on Earth, that we are endowed with superior moral and physical qualities and that our glorious future is preordained, either because of our attributes as Americans or because we are blessed by God or both.

The ability to magnify these simple and childish lies, to repeat them and have surrogates repeat them in endless loops of news cycles, gives these lies the aura of an uncontested truth. We are repeatedly fed words or phrases like yes we can, maverick, change, pro-life, hope, or war on terror. It feels good not to think. All we have to do is visualize what we want, believe in ourselves and summon those hidden inner resources, whether divine or national, that make the world conform to our desires. Reality is never an impediment to our advancement.

The Princeton Review analyzed the transcripts of the Gore-Bush debates, the Clinton-Bush-Perot debates of 1992, the Kennedy-Nixon debates of 1960 and the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858. It reviewed these transcripts using a standard vocabulary test that indicates the minimum educational standard needed for a reader to grasp the text. During the 2000 debates, George W. Bush spoke at a sixth-grade level (6.7) and Al Gore at a seventh-grade level (7.6). In the 1992 debates, Bill Clinton spoke at a seventh-grade level (7.6), while George H.W. Bush spoke at a sixth-grade level (6.8), as did H. Ross Perot (6.3). In the debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, the candidates spoke in language used by 10th-graders. In the debates of Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas the scores were respectively 11.2 and 12.0. In short, today's political rhetoric is designed to be comprehensible to a 10-year-old child or an adult with a sixth-grade reading level. It is fitted to this level of comprehension because most Americans speak, think and are entertained at this level. This is why serious film and theater and other serious artistic expression, as well as newspapers and books, are being pushed to the margins of American society. Voltaire was the most famous man of the 18th century. Today the most famous "person" is Mickey Mouse.

In our post-literate world, because ideas are inaccessible, there is a need for constant stimulus. News, political debate, theater, art and books are judged not on the power of their ideas but on their ability to entertain. Cultural products that force us to examine ourselves and our society are condemned as elitist and impenetrable. Hannah Arendt warned that the marketization of culture leads to its degradation, that this marketization creates a new celebrity class of intellectuals who, although well read and informed themselves, see their role in society as persuading the masses that "Hamlet" can be as entertaining as "The Lion King" and perhaps as educational. "Culture," she wrote, "is being destroyed in order to yield entertainment."

"There are many great authors of the past who have survived centuries of oblivion and neglect," Arendt wrote, "but it is still an open question whether they will be able to survive an entertaining version of what they have to say."

The change from a print-based to an image-based society has transformed our nation. Huge

segments of our population, especially those who live in the embrace of the Christian right and the consumer culture, are completely unmoored from reality. They lack the capacity to search for truth and cope rationally with our mounting social and economic ills. They seek clarity, entertainment and order. They are willing to use force to impose this clarity on others, especially those who do not speak as they speak and think as they think. All the traditional tools of democracies, including dispassionate scientific and historical truth, facts, news and rational debate, are useless instruments in a world that lacks the capacity to use them.

As we descend into a devastating economic crisis, one that Barack Obama cannot halt, there will be tens of millions of Americans who will be ruthlessly thrust aside. As their houses are foreclosed, as their jobs are lost, as they are forced to declare bankruptcy and watch their communities collapse, they will retreat even further into irrational fantasy. They will be led toward glittering and self-destructive illusions by our modern Pied Pipers—our corporate advertisers, our charlatan preachers, our television news celebrities, our self-help gurus, our entertainment industry and our political demagogues—who will offer increasingly absurd forms of escapism.

The core values of our open society, the ability to think for oneself, to draw independent conclusions, to express dissent when judgment and common sense indicate something is wrong, to be self-critical, to challenge authority, to understand historical facts, to separate truth from lies, to advocate for change and to acknowledge that there are other views, different ways of being, that are morally and socially acceptable, are dying. Obama used hundreds of millions of dollars in campaign funds to appeal to and manipulate this illiteracy and irrationalism to his advantage, but these forces will prove to be his most deadly nemesis once they collide with the awful reality that awaits us.

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Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-2352.html>