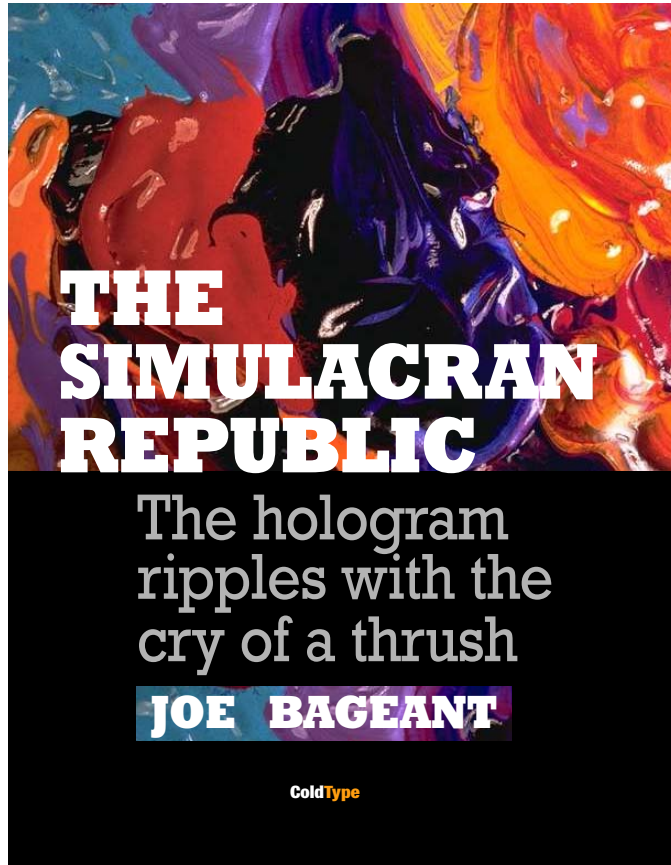


An abstract, high-contrast background featuring a central figure in dark blue and black, possibly a person or a creature, set against a backdrop of vibrant, swirling colors including red, orange, yellow, and purple. The overall style is reminiscent of a digital or holographic aesthetic.

THE SIMULACRAN REPUBLIC

The hologram
ripples with the
cry of a thrush

JOE BAGEANT



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THE SIMULACRAN REPUBLIC

The hologram
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It's a world of appearances.... packaged to the showroom specifications of a sit-com. She asks her hairdresser for 'tinted highlights' he mumbles something about going to the gym. He feels he should do something that requires him to clutch a bottle of mineral water and wipe his brow with the firm conviction that he's accomplished something more than providing the illusion that his presence in his own life is necessary. They believe in nothing as fervently as their own goodness. When she's asleep, he absently gazes at porn sites, before he checks out his stock portfolio online.

– Writer and social critic Jennifer Matsui

A **WHILE BACK** it was announced that a Japanese inventor had successfully created an invisibility cloak using a material made of thousands of tiny beads called "retro-reflectum." I found this so amazing that I told six friends, three men and three women, about it over the next two days. Not a one of them found it even interesting, much less amazing. Two of the men subsequently showed mild interest when I pointed out that it could be used to mask tanks and soldiers in combat, and one speculated on its terrorist implications. Our techno hyper-reality has so gutted and rewired the brains of Americans that ordinary intelligent people are not even capable of amazement at such a thing as invisibility! To me, this is an indication of a near-total death of the individual mind and imagination caused by our over-technologized, effects glutted sensory environment.

The pure miracle of invisibility is uninteresting unless it can be linked to, say the rumbling terror of an armored tank – made perhaps even more attention-grabbing by squashing the bloody guts out of an Iraq under its tracks? It's the sensory effect that matters, the simulacrum, not the reality. It's the kind of thing about America that drives me to thoughts of emigration daily.

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Americans, rich or poor, now live in a culture entirely perceived through, simulacra-media images and illusions. We live inside a self-referential media hologram of a nation that has not existed for quite some time now, especially in America's heartland. Our national reality is held together by a pale, carbon imprint of the original. The well-off with their upscale consumer aesthetic, live inside gated Disneyesque communities with gleaming uninhabited front porches representing some bucolic notion of the Great American home and family. The working class, true to its sports culture aesthetic, is a spectator to politics ... politics which are so entirely imagistic as to be holograms of a process, not a process. Social realism is a television commercial for America, a simulacran republic of eagles, church spires, brave young soldiers and heroic firefighters and "freedom of choice" within the hologram. America's citizens have been reduced to Balkanized consumer units by the corporate state's culture producing machinery.

We no longer have a country ... just the hollow shell of one, a global corporation masquerading electronically and digitally as a nation called the United States. The corporation now animates us from within our very selves through management of the need hierarchy in goods and information. Sure there is flesh within the machine, but its animating force is a viral concept, a meme run amok. Free market capitalism. We got to move them refrigerators, got to sell them color teevees...

Meanwhile the culture-generating industry spins our mythology like cotton candy. We all need it to survive, Hollywood myths, Imperial myths, melting pot myths, the saluting dick male myths. They keep the machine running. And when the machine is running correctly, it smoothes its own way by terrifying uncooperative people into submission in prisons and torture rooms, where we do not have to look at the corpses on ice and the naked hooded bodies handcuffed to the bars. We are innocent as long as we keep our eyes taped shut. And only with our eyes shut can we keep seeing the hologram. And with duct tape over our mouths, we can recite its slogans with one hand over our heart with the other one resting on the trigger.

The average American spends about one third of his or her waking life watching television. The neurological implications of this are so profound that they cannot even be comprehended in words, much less described by them. Television creates our reality, regulates our national perceptions and our interior hallucinations of who we Americans are (the best and only important tribe on the planet.) It schedules our cultural illusions of choice, displays pre-selected candidates in our elections, or types of consumer goods. It regulates holiday marketing opportunities and the national neurological seasons, which are now governed by the electrons of the illusion. We live within a media-generated belief system that functions as the operating instructions for society. Anything outside of its parameters represents fear and psychological freefall to the faceless legions of within it.

Our civilization, our culture, in as much as it can be said to exist in any cohesive way, is based

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upon two things, television and petroleum. Whether you are a custodian or the President, your world depends upon an unbroken supply of both. So it is small wonder that we all watch a televised global war for oil. As in all produced illusions, everyone we see is an actor. There are the television actors portraying what passes for reality, and real people performing for television. Non-actors in Congress perform in front of the cameras, grappling over the feeding tube on Terri Schiavo; real actors portray non-actors in "reality shows." Michael Jackson shows up for court in pajamas and Jeff Weise shows up for class with a gun. The demand for "newsmakers" is relentless as the empire's corporate cultural machinery weaves the warp of consumer illusions that make up our notion of individualism, and the weft of democratic mythology that constitutes our political system. This is by no means a free country and given the intense luminosity of the hologram, we cannot even see freedom from here, and probably would not recognize it if we could. Moreover though, we cannot tear our eyes away from the great flickering glow of the hologram.

As my late friend Timothy Leary put it, "An enormous industry, similar to the national projects of pyramid-building in Egypt, cathedral-building in medieval Europe, and prison-camp building in Stalinist Russia has emerged in America – the production of political martyrs, fallen heroes and concept outlaws. ... The essence of "news" is, of course, the modern version of Roman coliseum shows and gladiator combats." And like clockwork, there is the nightly ritual bloodletting through televised wars and domestic murders, with detective Lenny Briscoe finding the corpses at seven, eight and eleven PM weekdays.

The hologram that is our cathedral of consciousness and our national mind is an ever-darkening one. The average American, if he even thinks about the mind, thinks of it in the obsolete "mind-contained-in-the-brain" way. A few intellectuals and a handful of old dopers like me understand that reality is consensus based and is an interconnected network consisting of many minds operating along a theme. And the theme seems to be pathological.

America suffers from a psychosis, a psychosis being nothing more than an insistence upon staying in an untenable state of consciousness, despite the normal modeling of those around you. This is not out of meanness, but rather an indifference so profound as to be a sickness. The hologram IS the psychosis made manifest. Psychotics love to play ominous games with those around them, just as America does with the world today.

It always comes down to the one thing we never study in school, the one thing we cannot learn about in this country without a great deal of personal extracurricular effort — consciousness. As we have known at least since the Sixties, the core issue of our existence is consciousness, which our corporate state is compelled to control at all times. That's why drugs are illegal; that's why we have hundreds of television channels; and that's why you will never find anything much resembling the truth in U.S. newspapers and magazines. But there are still those of us who remember our consciousness experiments in the Sixties. Remember what is like to peer into other realities,

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not to mention observe the inherent folly and frequent horror of our own war-profit-driven, animal murdering, death-and-sex-without-love obsessed culture. There are those of us who know that when a thrush cries out from the branch it echoes throughout the galaxy. All things are connected and ownership of things is meaningless. The purpose of life is to know this. Lao-tsu knew it, just like Einstein knew it. But you and I are not allowed to. It would shatter our revered hologram, the one that threatens to shatter the world.

To even begin to dissolve this dangerous hologram we would have to examine the biggest lie of all – that technology is neutral and that people determine its ultimate effects. What divine horseshit! Consider that even the best use of nuclear energy leaves in its wake over the long haul an uninhabitable planet. No matter who is in charge we end up with millions of tons of waste with a half-life in the tens of thousands of years. But the hologram we revere asks us to judge the technology at its heart in strictly personal terms – cars, vacuum cleaners, and digital amusements. Pay no mind to the toxic rivers and a sky turning red. Science and technology are our religion and all philosophical decisions are made in the corporate world whose function is to sell commodities. Easily the most terrifying aspect of the industrial/media/political hologram is that we are trapped. There is no way out of a technological industrial machine where you need at least a car, a phone, etc. to function, to participate at all.

Thanks to the hologram, American culture, as such, is nearly over. It is not sustainable. It is not reformable. Not only are TV and all digital media unreformable, but they are sure to accelerate our demise more rapidly because of the technological capitalist paradigm of growth at all cost. We cannot eliminate the generators of the hologram, television and electronic media. They are the glue of the hologram, the mediators of our human experience. We will all die without them, now that they have replaced all other previous forms of knowledge, the ancient forms, and have colonized our inner lives like a virus. The natural world is not only boring but does not even exist, as we sit mesmerized, while the hologram sells our very feelings back to us. Are we adequate? How are we supposed to act? Did you phone someone you love today? What and whom are we to fear? You are rendered numb by a hypnotic medium, react to your own feelings which have been stolen and doled back to you, and pay money to do so. Brilliant! The commodification of human consciousness is probably the most astounding, if ghoulish, accomplishment of American Capitalist culture.

Meanwhile, there is the omniscient "one voice that speaks out to the many," the disembodied military/corporate voice, that all but guarantees an authoritarian political scenario. Unlike the humans who constitute their living innards, the corporations animating the hologram are themselves deathless. The citizens cannot harm them. Under U.S. law corporations have all the rights and protections of individuals, and they cannot be regulated because corporations are "fictional persons" and have the same right to free speech as persons. Of course, given that the media are

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corporations, their speech is a hellva lot more impactful and significant than any one person's. "But," as the brilliant author of *In the Absence of the Sacred*, Gerry Mander puts it: "They have none of the commensurate responsibilities. Communities cannot control them because they can always move to other communities. They do not have corporeality; they can't be executed. You can imprison certain people within a corporation if they engage in criminal acts. The corporation itself, however, lives beyond the people in it."

The light of the hologram plays on material reality and remakes it in its own image, destroying all connection with the natural world. Malls and suburbs and hyper-real surfaces and speed ... meaningless but dazzling technology. The earth gets a makeover in the image of Disneyland and becomes inhabited by humans who are commodified versions of themselves.

It is difficult for people to grasp that we are in an age of corporate dominion just as we were once in an age of domination by royal families, kings and warlords. Somehow it is hard to equate our tribute rendered to the credit card companies, the insurance companies, the IRS, the power cartels, the mortgage banks, with the kind of bondage it is. Yet we must do these things to be allowed to live in society. The only other choice is to sleep under a bridge. And these days, whether due to an onsetting depression or creeping wisdom, I often contemplate just that. I really do. Of course I understand that even under a bridge one cannot escape the hologram's blue flicker issuing from a hundred million encroaching suburban windows. But like I said, there are still a few of us old bastards out here who remember. And we can still hear the cry of the thrush echoing, still out there shattering galaxies. Freedom is possible.

Joe Bageant is a writer and magazine editor living in Winchester, Virginia. His forthcoming book, Drink, Pray, Fight and Fuck: Dispatches from America's Class Wars, is due out next year, to be published by Random House. Visit his blog at <http://www.joebageant.com>. He may be contacted at joebageant@joebageant.com.



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