

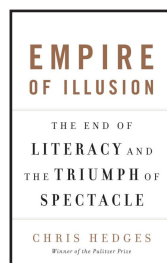
# From Rene Guénon to Christopher Hedges: The 'Signs of the Times' in an Empire of Illusion?

*Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*

By Christopher Hedges

New York: Nation Books, 2009

A Review Essay by Atif Khalil



When the French philosopher and traditionalist, Rene Guénon (d. 1951),<sup>1</sup> authored his *Crisis of the Modern World* in the mid-1920s, and then, less than two decades later, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, what would he have imagined the world would

<sup>1</sup> One of the best overviews of Guénon's thought is to be found in Patrick Laude, *Pathways to an Inner Islam: Massignon, Corbin, Guénon and Schuon* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010). For biographical details and a synopsis of some of the main themes in his writings, see Robin Waterfield, *Rene Guénon and the Future of the West: The Life and Writings of a 20th-century Metaphysician* (Great Britain: Crucible, 1987). See also Gai Eaton, *The Richest Vein: Eastern Tradition and Modern Thought* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2005 [1st edition, 1949]), 183-209; Abd al-Wahid Pallavacini, *A Sufi Master's Message: In Memoriam Rene Guénon* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010). Julius's Evola's short 1939 tract, *Rene Guénon: A Teacher of Modern Times* (Sequim, WA: Holmes Publishing Group, 2008), a collection of articles originally published in Italian, is also useful, but the author's own far-right political leanings should not be confused with Guénon's own views. For a clarification on these matters, see M. Ali Lakhani, "Umberto Eco, Fascism and Tradition," *Sacred Web* 11 (2003). For critical reflections from someone who shared Guénon's own fundamental perspectives, see Frithjof Schuon, *Rene Guénon: Some Observations* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004 [first published, 1984]).

look like almost three quarters of a century later? While his prescient meditations have been accurately described as prophetic,<sup>2</sup> especially in regard to the social, cultural, religious and deleterious ecological consequences of the disintegration of societies centered on principles of a higher order, it would be unreasonable to expect the French metaphysician to have foreseen the more peculiar anomalies of the modern world. These are the kind so vividly described by Christopher Hedges in *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of the Spectacle*,<sup>3</sup> in which he laments an American culture—and one that is rapidly spreading across the globe—increasingly marked by such phenomena as the loss of genuine literacy and the emergence of “junk politics,” the growth of RealityTV and the cult of the celebrity, the merging of tabloid gossip with mainstream news, the proliferation of pornography and its expansion into mainstream culture, not to mention the devastating contributions of corporatism and the unquenchable thirst for consumption and economic progress on the environment: in short, a culture which is removing itself from reality and retreating into a world of illusion. It was perhaps only natural that such a society—as the late social critic Neil Postman so clearly saw, and in whose tradition of cultural self-criticism Hedges may be said to fall—preoccupied with “amusing itself to death,” and enthralled by the “technopolization” of society, without thoughtful consideration of its long term consequences, would reach such a stage as the one so graphically described by Hedges in his learned and poetic but ultimately dismal threnody: “Our culture of illusion” he writes at the end of the work, “is, at its core, a culture of death. It will die and leave little of value behind.”<sup>4</sup>

Hedges’s work is divided into five chapters, in each of which he explores a different facet or “illusion” of contemporary American life. Much of what he writes about, however, as already noted, can also apply to other parts of the world affected by the globalization of American culture. In the present review, we shall explore only some of the themes Hedges touches on in *Empire of Illusion*. While his treatment is somewhat exhaustive, pragmatic considerations guided by constraints of space will allow us to examine only some aspects of his critique. In the process, an attempt will be made

<sup>2</sup> Seyyed H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1989), 192.

<sup>3</sup> *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of the Spectacle* (New York: Random House, 2009 [Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2010]).

<sup>4</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 102.

to compare Hedges's insights with Guénon's broader philosophical objections to certain salient characteristics of the modern world.



Christopher Hedges devotes a significant part of *Empire* to lamenting the intellectual climate of modern Western culture, in particular, the United States. Even elite universities, idealized as models of higher education, in his eyes, promote little genuine learning. The chapter in which he presents his rather compelling indictment of the university system, focusing on some of its most highly reputed institutions, is appropriately entitled “the illusion of wisdom.” His grievances are multifaceted. Among them is that academics, particularly in the humanities, are pushed, by the very nature of the universities which employ them, into scrutinizing minute and ultimately meaningless trivia and data. They become specialized in narrow disciplines, exploring areas that are of little social consequence or existential relevance. They communicate with each other through a highly refined technical lexicon which prevents them from exchanging ideas with anyone outside of their fields. The use of impenetrable, specialized vocabulary in turn produces an illusory sense of knowledge coupled with an unwarranted feeling of intellectual hubris. Here Hedges recounts a telling anecdote to illustrate what he has in mind. Sometime after he graduated from Harvard Divinity School, he met up with a fellow classmate who was by then a professor of theology. When he inquired what she was teaching, the professor responded by unleashing “a torrent of academic jargon” which left him stupefied. Despite three years of seminary education at one of the leading schools in the country, Hedges confessed that he had little idea of what she was talking about. This retreat of academics into “narrow self-imposed fiefdoms”<sup>5</sup> and “specialized ghettos,”<sup>6</sup> has, for Hedges, a number of severely detrimental consequences, the most grievous of which are that it prevents them from asking the most pressing cultural, ethical, political, and philosophical questions; it turns them away from searching for the common good and scrutinizing the relation between the powerful and the weak, let alone interrogating the underpinnings of the very institutions they are paid to serve. The academic, as far as Hedges sees things, exists “to make the system work, not to examine it,”<sup>7</sup> blindly

<sup>5</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 90.

<sup>6</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 98.

<sup>7</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 98.

servicing a “power structure he or she has never been taught to question.”<sup>8</sup> The hyper-literacy of the specialist is, in reality, a kind of illiteracy, since it often brings with it ignorance of what is most essential, an incapacity to probe into the most meaningful issues of human ultimacy and teleology, the greater welfare of society, and perhaps most importantly for Hedges, the vital interplay between politics, power and morality. Meanwhile, the foundations of the institution at virtually all levels—economic, political, theoretical—of which the specialist is a part, as a cog-in-the-machine, so as to say, remain unchallenged. To do otherwise, on the part of the academic, would be to risk stigmatization, loss of funding, marginalization, and, in more extreme cases, unemployment (with the corrosion of the tenure system).<sup>9</sup> The impotence of the academic, argues Hedges, serves the interests of the university and the broader system of which it is a part—what president Eisenhower dubbed the “military-industrial academic complex”—since the entire network remains unchallenged by those who might otherwise have the capacity to be its most thoughtful and penetrating critics. All the while, both insiders and outsiders remain ensnared by the illusion of its pretensions to higher learning.<sup>10</sup>

A closely related grievance of Hedges’s centers on the nature of the

<sup>8</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 96.

<sup>9</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 110.

<sup>10</sup> In another work, Hedges shares a passage from an essay of Irving Howe’s (“The Age of Conformity”) which underscores many of his own grievances: “[W]henever they [intellectuals] become absorbed into accredited institutions of society they not only lose their traditional rebelliousness but to one extent or another they cease to function as intellectuals. The institutional world needs intellectuals but it does not want them as intellectuals. It beckons to them *because* of what they are but it will not allow them, at least within its sphere of articulation, either to remain or entirely cease being what they are. It needs them for their knowledge, their talent, their inclinations and passions; it insists that they retain a measure of these endowments, which it means to employ for its own ends, and without which the intellectuals would be of no use whatever.” See *The World as it is: Dispatches on the Myth of Human Progress* (New York: Nation Books, 2001), 108. Guénon too had a problem with hyper-specialization, but his contentions rested not so much on the grounds that it prevented intellectuals from interrogating power, but the epistemic costs as which such knowledge came. As far as Guénon was concerned, it prevented the acquisition of a synthetic, organically inter-related knowledge of reality, the most important of which entailed the ability to understand the *meaning* of the body of knowledge that was acquired in light of higher metaphysical principles, and which alone made such a pursuit worthwhile. “[D]etailed knowledge,” he wrote, “is insignificant in itself and not worth the sacrifice of synthetic knowledge which it entails.” Moreover, the analyses of trivia could go on indefinitely “without coming one step closer to true knowledge.” *Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. Marco Pallis et al (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001 [1st edition in French, 1927]), 44, 46.

education universities impart to their students. Despite the growing recognition in recent years of various forms of intelligence (emotional, social, and creative, to name but a few) universities privilege analytic skills above all else—a fact reflected by the very format of standardized tests used to assess potential students. Having taught at a number of North America’s best universities, Hedges saw, on the basis of first-hand experience, that students tend to be evaluated largely on their rational abilities alone, which, in the case of the humanities, might involve faithfully regurgitating class material, explaining the underlying plot or even the intricate details of a literary classic without necessarily drawing out its deeper meaning or relevance, or applying a variety of accepted theoretical frameworks to decipher texts or human phenomenon. While universities do have their share of students who yearn for knowledge and higher truth, who take seriously the deeper, perennial questions of human existence, who engage their subject material in creative and unconventional ways, in short, those who use the opportunity to attend university, as he puts it, to “expand the life of the mind,” they remain a marginal minority.<sup>11</sup> As far as grades and evaluation are concerned, the intellectual curiosities of students have little to no impact in how they fare overall in relation to their peers. What matters most is meeting the requirements of the courses one is enrolled in, an end which is most efficiently obtained through conformity to standards which privilege analytic acumen. The preference for this one particular kind of intelligence is especially evident in the most highly reputed universities, a fact noted by William Deresciewicz, who taught English for some time at Yale, when he observed that “elite schools, precisely because their students (and faculty, and administrators) possess this one form of intelligence to such a high degree, are more apt to ignore the value of others. One naturally prizes what one most possesses and what most makes for one’s advantages. But [... other forms of intelligence ...] are not distributed preferentially among the educational elite.”<sup>12</sup>

The reduction of intelligence to analytic prowess and skill, even when broadly defined to include mathematical, linguistic and other such talents, calls to mind the distinction Guénon and others, following the medieval tradition before them, have frequently drawn between *ratio*

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<sup>11</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 102.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Hedges, *Empire*, 104.

and *intellectus*, or *reason* and *Intellect*.<sup>13</sup> The former is logical, discursive and instrumental in nature, but incapable, on its own, of guiding one to higher let alone objective knowledge, including transcendent values or one's moral intuitions. The latter, on the other hand, what Guénon variously referred to as "intellectual intention," "pure intellect," and "transcendent intellect," makes such knowledge possible. Synthetic and creative in nature, and grounded in a principle of a higher order, being in a sense, a microcosmic reflection of it within the human being, *intellectus* alone allows for knowledge of the "whole as a whole," and hence metaphysics.<sup>14</sup> Rationality on its own does not have this ability, let alone the capacity to verify the truths of its own processes, since it remains locked within itself—a dilemma which has led in recent years to the postmodern turn. Expressed differently, there must, for Guénon and like-minded thinkers, reside within the human being that which both transcends and envelopes the strictly human mode of existence, that which creates an epistemological link to the entire world of existence outside, without which objective knowledge of such a world remains out of reach. Moreover, since this link to the world outside is established not through *ratio* but *intellectus*, the latter is not simply a form of intelligence, but more significantly, its very foundation. It is thereby, *ipso facto*, more central to knowledge than the various forms of intelligence combined, since it renders intelligence possible to begin with, to the extent we define intelligence as the ability to know what *is* and not simply the art of "mental coordination." In its absence, there is no way of determining whether what one knows and experiences

<sup>13</sup> Guénon, "Heart and Brain," *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, ed. Michel Valsan, trans. A. Moore (Cambridge, UK: Quinta Essentia, 1995), 287-294, 292; Cf. Graham Rooth, *Prophet for a Dark Age: A Companion to the Works of Rene Guénon* (Brighton, Portland: Sussex, 2008), 246-247. See also Gai Eaton, *The Richest Vein*, 192-193; Nasr, *Knowledge*, 4-5. The difference between ratio and intellect may also be compared to the distinction Rumi (d. 1273) draws between the "partial" and "Universal" Intellect. See William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 35-37.

<sup>14</sup> The specifically creative function of intelligence may also be attributed to the "imaginal faculty," which resided, in certain streams of medieval thought, between the intellect and sense-perception. For an excellent synopsis of the relation between the imaginal faculty and the intellect, and the loss of the former in the Western intellectual tradition, see Henry Corbin, "Towards a Chart of the Imaginal," in *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Sufi 'ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977 [1st edition, 1960]), vii-xix.

within the mind corresponds to what actually exists outside the mind. To quote Guénon on this critical distinction, “[r]eason, in fact, which is only a mediate knowing faculty, is the strictly human mode of intelligence.” In contrast, “intellectual intuition can be called supra-human, as it is a direct participation in universal intelligence which, residing in the heart, that is, at the being’s very centre ... penetrates this being from within and illuminates him with its radiation.”<sup>15</sup>

While Hedges does not, considering the more restricted aims of the book, take his own inquiry in this direction, nor probe into the broader significance of the loss of a recognition of *intellectus* within the scholarly and intellectual climate of the modern university, there is, nevertheless, a meeting of minds between him and Guénon on the limited nature of *ratio*, and the dangers inherent in reducing intelligence to it alone. For Hedges, in the hands of those whose primary existential concerns are neither benign nor morally edifying, analytic intelligence will not be used for noble ends, whether they involve moral rectification and the redressing of economic, social and political inequities, or even the search for truth, but instead, profit, material gain, and their justification. It will serve in particular, as is already increasingly evident within the university system, the interests of corporations and the economic elite—a case of what Schuon would likely refer to as *ratio* being put “at the service of an error.”<sup>16</sup> Analytic skill, so prized within academia, in-and-of-itself merely instrumental and morally neutral, can “be used for further exploitation of the working class by corporations and the mechanisms of repression and war,” writes Hedges, “or it can be used to fight these forces. But if you determine worth by wealth, as these institutions do, then examining and reforming social and political systems is inherently devalued. The unstated ethic of these elite institutions is to make as much money as you can ...”<sup>17</sup> To this end, he notes that the goals of the universities are increasingly being directed towards producing graduates equipped to gather and accumulate wealth,

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<sup>15</sup> Guénon, “Heart and Brain,” 292. This is also why he states elsewhere that rationalism on its own is incapable of reaching “absolute truth.” *The Essential Rene Guénon: Metaphysics, Tradition, and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. John Herlihy (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2009), 68.

<sup>16</sup> Schuon, *Essential Schuon*, 485. While Schuon here specifically has in mind the “errors” of modern philosophy, his observation can also apply to the present context.

<sup>17</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 104.

and in the process, sustain an unsustainable financial system—a fact reflected in the steady decline of enrollment in the humanities and the social sciences over the last decades, business replacing education as the most sought after major, the folding and closure of many small liberal arts schools, and the growth of exclusively corporate, for-profit universities (such as DeVry and the University of Phoenix).<sup>18</sup> Guénon seems to have foreseen the earlier stages of this trend in his own time when he observed, in relation to the natural sciences, that “industry is no longer an application of science ... it has become the reason for, and justification of science.”<sup>19</sup> For the French thinker there lay an inextricable relation between a worldview that reduced all of reality to matter alone and an almost exclusively narrow focus on economic and financial considerations. The proof of the thoroughly materialistic and “quantitative” nature of modern society, wrote Guénon, could be grasped by anyone who simply took note of “the tremendous importance economic factors take on nowadays, both in the lives of peoples and individuals: industry, commerce, finance—these seem to be the only things that count; and this is in agreement with the fact ... that the only social distinction that has survived is the one based on material wealth.” Even “[p]olitics,” he argued, “seem to be altogether controlled by finance.”<sup>20</sup> Hedges would have little to disagree.

Where Guénon and him would have differed, it appears, would have been on the former’s claim that the tendency to interpret social and political dynamics through the prism of economic factors alone severely distorts our knowledge of their real causes, and that the tendency to do so is, moreover, itself simply a symptom of how deeply materialism and the “reign of quantity” pervade and infuse the thought processes of the modern mind.<sup>21</sup> While Hedges does not necessarily subscribe to the kind of “historical materialism” decried by Guénon in all its details, it does nevertheless color his writings.

On the whole, Hedges offers a pensive and thoughtful indictment of modern universities. Yet, at the same time, and despite the strengths of his analysis, there are certain issues pertaining to the nature of academia he overlooks, and which, when taken into consideration, soften the brunt

<sup>18</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 108, 110.

<sup>19</sup> Guénon, *Crisis*, 87.

<sup>20</sup> Guénon, *Crisis*, 87-88.

<sup>21</sup> Guénon, *Crisis*, 88.



of at least some of his censure. First of all, he seems to have unrealistically high expectations of academics, without recognizing that not all who enter the profession do so for such admirable ends as alleviating human suffering, redressing social injustices, promoting the greater good or even disinterestedly pursuing truth. Many simply have gone into the profession because they found, at some stage in their education, that they were particularly adept at and captivated by certain subjects and so decided to make careers out of researching and teaching them. While we may hold those who enter pastoral, humanitarian, philanthropic, or social justice oriented lines of work to high moral standards, it may be unreasonable to expect the same of scholars and scientists, whose primary credentials are determined not by the motivations of their research nor by how they put it to use, but instead, by how it fares in the eyes of their academic peers, which is simply another way of saying, to the extent that it contributes to the advancement of knowledge in a narrowly defined field.

Furthermore, Hedges's critique overlooks the various competing allegiances of academics to intellectual and political perspectives which make it difficult if not impossible for them to respond with a unanimous moral voice to matters of real consequence, whether they are economic, political or social in nature. The military and imperial ventures of the state, for example, would naturally elicit different reactions depending on where one stood on the political spectrum. In addition, Hedges's analysis does not adequately factor in the significant sway which postmodern modes of thinking hold in academia, itself something of a two-edged sword in relation to the concerns he raises in the book. While the emergence of this philosophical approach has contributed to rendering those influenced by it more attentive to the narratives and experiences of the disenfranchised and powerless, the "wretched of the earth" who occupy the margins of society, not to mention the West's historical "others," it has also robbed many who have been swayed by its appeal of their own moral certainties and convictions—the very certainties and convictions which might otherwise inspire them to conscientious action, moral reform and speaking truth to power. In the absence of *all* absolutes, so cleverly dismantled by the sophistry of postmodernism, on what grounds, it may be asked, would one be moved or feel obliged to stand up for "transcendent values," or "nurture

the capacity for individual conscience”?<sup>22</sup> In the same vein, it is hard to see how the “moral nihilism embraced by elite universities,” which Hedges so eloquently and rightfully bemoans, can be entirely attributed to the corporate and economic interests of the elite. At least *some* of it must be laid at the floor of a view of reality which has emerged out of the ruins of the “death of God,” and shortly after it, the death of the god of Reason, a philosophical perspective in which, as Nietzsche foreshadowed, there would no longer remain “any up or down,” and which would leave its adherents “straying as through an infinite nothing,” in a moral, existential and spiritual wasteland.<sup>23</sup> This is not to suggest that postmodernists are complacent about and indifferent to issues of moral concern. On the contrary, some of the most engaged and conscientious academics subscribe to the philosophy in one form or another. And indeed, certain faculties which are deeply concerned about issues of justice and fairness, such as social work, are heavily influenced by the theoretical framework it offers. But it is hard to imagine how the logical conclusions drawn from the premises of postmodernism itself cannot but create some measure of cognitive dissonance in those who might otherwise desire to dedicate themselves to such lofty, and dare one say *universal* ideals of love, compassion, justice and truth—the very ideals which Hedges would like (and once again, rightly so) academics to give themselves more selflessly to.<sup>24</sup>

The aforementioned considerations should not detract from the value and merit of Hedges’s incisive assessment of the current state of the university, particularly elite ones. Those who work within institutions of higher learning, who are deeply concerned about the role they must play within society at large, and who have given much thought to the concerns Hedges raises, would likely agree with much of his appraisal. While his own views of higher education are nowhere nearly as bleak as those of Guénon, who would have seen such institutions as part of the expanded apparatus of a desacrilized society which, by turning away from the metaphysical foundations of Tradition, had rendered

<sup>22</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 91.

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181-182 (#125).

<sup>24</sup> For postmodernism in light of Guénon’s thought, see Patrick Laude, “The Reign of Quantity and the Parody of Quality: Reflections on Rene Guénon’s Intimations of Post-Modernity,” *Sacred Web* 31 (2013): 29-45.

itself virtually unsalvageable, on the brink of heralding in a Dajjalic age within the final stages of the *Kali-Yuga*, Hedges himself does not hold to an entirely idealistic view of the potential of universities either. He quotes Deresiewicz approvingly, in the latter's observation that "I don't think there ever was a golden age of intellectualism in the American university."<sup>25</sup> But Hedges has more hope than Guénon did in his time, and in relative terms, a greater degree of optimism, if not in the structures and institutions, at least in the individuals working within them. From Guénon's own point of view, it was not that he was a pessimist as much as he was a realist. "For it must needs be that offences come," he quotes from the Gospel, "but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" (Matthew 18:7).



A sizeable portion of *Empire* is devoted to the growth, spread and impact of pornography on American culture in recent years in a chapter to which he fittingly gives the title, "The Illusion of Love." This part of the book may be the most disturbing, and not simply because of the author's unrestrained, graphic depiction of the brute realities of life inside the industry. While some critics may find the details furnished in his treatment to be in bad taste, Hedges's own intentions are neither to provoke indignation for its own sake, nor give fodder to the imagination, (for which a reader, in any case, could easily turn elsewhere), but to convey instead a sense of how dark the world of this most lucrative of businesses actually is, encouraging the reader, in the process, to reflect over its moral, social and even political ramifications.

When pornography first began to gain headway into society in the late 60s and early 70s, part and parcel of what Carolyn Bronstein has described as a "market place manifestation of the sexual revolution," many feminists who had until then championed the ideals of the revolution, which included liberation from traditionally accepted norms of marriage and sexual "decency," soon came to realize, to their great disappointment, that one of the movement's most inescapable of consequences was the "ubiquitous public image of female bodies

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<sup>25</sup> Cited in Hedges, *Empire*, 107.

presented for male sexual consumption.”<sup>26</sup> Not long after its emergence on the heels of the sexual revolution, pornography began to slide from the showcasing of erotica and sexuality, through the slippery slope of gradually relaxing anti-obscenity laws, into increasingly lurid and visceral representations of male sexual aggression, fueled largely by public unrest and dissatisfaction with softer and milder types of earlier industry production.<sup>27</sup> Like any addiction, consumers needed stronger and harder doses of the drug to reach previous levels of satisfaction. The trend continued, so that now, almost half a century after pornography first began to enter into the social consciousness of the West, the most barbaric and humiliating types of sexual and psychological degradation have become common place. While pornography “has always primarily involved the eroticization of unlimited male power,” he writes, “today it also involves the expression of male power through physical abuse, even torture, of women.”<sup>28</sup> He demonstrates this by describing some of the industry’s popular contemporary subgenres and the various forms of dehumanization women are regularly subjected to in them.

Hedges’s treatment of pornography provides a glimpse into how industry insiders actually think and feel about their line of work. One of these producers, Bill Margold, also a performer, is rather candid: “My whole reason for being in the industry is to satisfy the desire of the men in the world who basically don’t care much for women,” he says. “I strongly believe this, and the industry hates me for saying this ... I believe this. I’ve heard audiences cheer me when I do something foul onscreen. When I’ve strangled a person or sodomized a person or brutalized a person, the audience is cheering my action, and then when I’ve fulfilled my warped desire, the audience applauds.”<sup>29</sup> Another producer begrudges what he considers to be the artistic decline of pornography from its earlier days because it has forced him to “make stupid content for stupid people.” “This is a YouTube world,” he laments, and the pornography coming out today

<sup>26</sup> Carolyn Bronstein, *Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement, 1976-1986* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 65.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. For the psychology behind this potential need for greater degrees of explicitness and violence, see Dolf Zillmann, “Effects of Prolonged Consumption of Pornography,” in D. Zillmann and J. Bryant, eds. *Pornography: Research Advances and Policy Considerations* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: 1989), 127-155. See in particular 154.

<sup>28</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 72.

<sup>29</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 74.

“is a prime example of the “stupidification of America.”<sup>30</sup>

Some of the most startling revelations, as we might expect, come from women who left the industry unable to cope with the emotional, psychological and physical trauma it caused them, and who have now become outspoken critics. One such anti-pornography activist, Shelley Lubben, is the founder of Pink Cross, a Christian outreach and support organization which tries to help women in the business leave the profession and transition back into society. “They are jaded and don’t even ask if it is wrong,” she says of females in the industry. “They fall into it ... They get ... uterus hemorrhages. They get HPV and herpes, and they turn themselves off emotionally and die. They check out mentally. They get PTSD like Vietnam vets. They don’t know who they are.”<sup>31</sup> Another ex-performer, who credits Pink Cross for garnering enough strength to bring the shattered pieces of her life back together, reveals just how widespread drug addiction is in the business. The “lifestyle of a porn star,” she says, “is to spend your money as soon as you make it on weed, alcohol, coke, ecstasy, and Vicodin ... Every girl I know used alcohol. We were drinking so we did not feel the pain, physically and emotionally.”<sup>32</sup> And then there is Jan Meza, now a doctoral candidate at the University of Texas in psychology and happily married. She abandoned the industry on the verge of a nervous breakdown, addicted to alcohol and painkillers. Her estimate is that as many as 75% of female performers use drugs immediately before filming. “The main thing now is crystal meth, cocaine, and heroin,” she confesses. “You have to numb yourself to go on set. The more you work, the more you have to numb yourself.” “People do drugs,” she goes on to state, “because they can’t deal with the way they are being treated.” She doesn’t mince her words in describing the physical abuse female performers must endure: “You get ripped. Your insides can come out of you. It’s never-ending. You are viewed as an object, not a human spirit. People don’t care.” And while she admits there are doctors specific to the business who are available, they are more than willing to dispense “Vicodin, Viagra, anything you want, because all they care about is money.”<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the only facet of Hedges’s treatment more alarming than his

<sup>30</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 78 and 61; cf. Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*.

<sup>31</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 60.

<sup>32</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 62.

<sup>33</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 81.

exposé of life inside the industry is the statistical data he brings to highlight just how widespread pornography use has become in recent years. In a general sense, violence in pornography has grown in proportion to the overall expansion of the industry. "Porn gets grosser and grosser," says Lubben. Acts that were never performed in the industry, she goes on to bemoan, now garner awards.<sup>34</sup> Hedges notes that there are 13,000 pornographic films produced each year in the US alone with national annual revenues climbing up to \$10 billion.<sup>35</sup> The roughly \$60 million brought in every year from American adult bookstore sales in the 1970s stands as a fractional sliver of profits today.<sup>36</sup> Beyond the US market, worldwide revenues from the industry reached almost \$100 billion in 2006, a figure which, as Hedges points out, exceeded the total revenues of Amazon.com, eBay, Yahoo!, Google, Microsoft, Apple, Earthlink and Netflix combined. And to say that large corporations profit from the business would be a gross understatement. Through their subsidiaries, General Motors and AT&T raked in 80% of all dollars spent on pornography, directly benefiting from everything that the industry stands for. While increasing societal tolerance of violence and sexuality in mainstream television and film in the last two decades may account for at least some of this growth, the World Wide Web has been the principle contributor to the spread of pornography's reach and distribution. There are now an estimated 42 million pornography sites, 12% of the entire internet; and 1 in 4 of all search engine requests, according to Hedges, are pornographic.<sup>37</sup>

The internet has also enabled the industry, through increasing private access (via personal laptops, iPads, iPhones, etc.), to extend into a lucrative underage market. At present, the largest consumers of pornography fall between the ages of 12 and 17, a fact which has not gone unnoticed to the industry's marketing entrepreneurs.<sup>38</sup> "Porn is the new rock and roll," says the director of production for a major distributor. "Young people and women are embracing porn and making purchases. Porn targets the mid-teens to the mid-twenties and up."<sup>39</sup> We can only imagine the long term consequences of early exposure to this medium on the maturation

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<sup>34</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 60.

<sup>35</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 58.

<sup>36</sup> Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*, 64.

<sup>37</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 80.

<sup>38</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Hedges, *Empire*, 58.

of youth and teenagers into adults. Pornography's incredible influence on moral values, interpersonal relations, what remains acceptable within the boundaries of relationships and marriage, not to mention the pressure it places on young women on how to look, and what they should tolerate of their own sexual objectification, cannot be overstated. Nor can we underestimate its contributions to eating disorders and the increasing use of plastic surgery all the way from botox to liposuction. When Faye Wattleton, the President of the Centre for the Advancement of Women observation, asks why is it that "deep down within we'd all like to be porn stars ...?"<sup>40</sup> it is clear that pornography has entered mainstream culture. "It has won the culture war," writes Hedges. "Pornography and the commercial mainstream have fused."<sup>41</sup>

The proliferation of pornography also has had, for Hedges, far-reaching political ramifications. He argues that through its desensitization to violence and brutality, it cannot but make its viewers indifferent to atrocities committed or endorsed by our governments. The violence and humiliation we witness in pornography and the violence and humiliation to which we subject our so-called enemies are both elements of a broader cultural matrix. To quote Hedges:

Porn reflects the endemic cruelty of our society. This is a society that does not blink when the industrial slaughter unleashed by the United States and its allies kills hundreds of civilians in Gaza or hundreds of thousands of innocents in Iraq and Afghanistan [...] The Abu Ghraib images that were released, and the hundreds more disturbing images that remain classified, could be stills from porn films [...] The photographs reflect the raging undercurrent of sexual callousness and perversion that runs through contemporary culture. These images speak in the language of porn, professional wrestling, reality television, music videos, and the corporate culture. It is the language of absolute control, total domination, racial hatred, fetishistic images of slavery and humiliating submission. It is a world without pity. It is about reducing other human beings to commodities, to objects. It is a reflection of the sickness of gonzo porn.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 86.

<sup>41</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 86.

<sup>42</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 72-73. "Gonzo" as Hedges explains, is a popular subgenre of the industry particularly known for its violence and humiliation. See 59. For a useful though dated collection of articles on pornography's contribution to violence, some of which overturn earlier, inconclusive findings, see Neil Malamuth and Edward Donnerstein, eds. *Pornography and Sexual Aggression* (Orlando: Academic Press, 1984). For a study which documents pornography's desensitizing effect on men, see Zillmann, "Effects of Prolonged Consumption of Pornography," 127-157.

Hedges's treatment of the impact of pornography on our society is as alarming as it is thoughtful. And while it is hard not to hear the voice of a deeply conscientious Presbyterian father ringing in the background, the arguments he brings to bear against the industry are, as a whole, compelling for anyone concerned with matters of social justice, the common good, and the welfare of society, regardless of their own intellectual or theological leanings. Even though his critique is not faith-based, it is nevertheless informed by some of the values of faith, of what he sometimes describes as "honoring the sacred." It also brings to the fore, in some respects, the intersections between conservative religious and feminist objections to the industry.<sup>43</sup>

How would Guénon have understood the phenomenon of pornography? On the one hand, the question is a difficult one to answer since even though pornography is as old as cinema itself, it was a largely marginalized and peripheral element of Western society in the French thinker's own time. The subject was therefore, somewhat naturally, left unaddressed by him. On the other hand, the growth and spread of pornography in recent years would not have surprised him in the least. He would likely have seen in it a symptom of the "reign of quantity" and the "solidification" of the world he had described so lucidly in eschatological terms.<sup>44</sup> Recall the words of Jan Meza, that in pornography you are "an object, not a human spirit." The transformation of women into virtually inanimate, commercialized, hyper-sexualized sources of profane pleasure would have been, for Guénon, the marks of a society consumed by materiality and exteriority, unable to recognize the human being as both a receptacle of the "divine spirit" and an *imago dei*. It would have reflected, for him, in the crudest of imagery, the inversion of "Pontifical Man" into "Promethean Man" (to use Nasr's terminology).<sup>45</sup> He might have also seen in pornography's illusions of beauty and love, a parody of genuine celestial beauty and love, and hence, a parody of quality—a fitting symbol not only of "anti-tradition" but a "counter-tradition" which mimics the angelic splendor of Paradise. Moreover, in the very perversity of the values fostered by the industry, and our increasing inability to

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Ronald Berger et al. *Feminism and Pornography* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 19-20.

<sup>44</sup> See Guénon, "The Solidification of the World," in *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004 [1st edition in French, 1945]), 113-119.

<sup>45</sup> Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 160-188.



recognize this perversity *as* perversity, attested to not only by our growing tolerance of its presence in our midst but also its integration into mainstream culture, he would no doubt have found, symbolically speaking, evidence of the expanding fissures surrounding the base of the “Great Wall” which in previous epochs protected us, to a much greater extent, from influences originating from the subtle domains of the lower, inferior realms of the cosmic hierarchy. In the language and symbolism of the Islamic tradition, as Guénon wrote, it would be through these very fissures that the hordes of Gog and Magog would finally force their way into our world, apocalyptically heralding the end of the present historical cycle.<sup>46</sup> But this final entry would itself be prefigured by certain mental dispositions within the body of the collective human psyche which would have been for Guénon the very dispositions which have allowed pornography to extend its roots deep into the soil of the modern world.

It is also worth noting, in this context, a curious fact to which Evola (for all his errors) drew attention, namely that in the Hindu tradition *Kali* will be fully awakened and dominate the final stages of the *Kali Yuga*. As the overlord of destruction and desire, violence and sex, “who stamps the epoch with her sign,” the world of pornography might have been, for Guénon, an appropriate symbol of her reign.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, for Evola himself it was. Discerning the trends which were beginning to appear in his own time, and whose future consequences he intuited, he decried the “universal feverishness of sex” which signified for him the “regressive nature of the present era.”<sup>48</sup> We may also add, at risk of some digression, that according to Evola, classical antiquity divided the human being into three parts, the head, the breast, and the lower regions. Each of these corresponded to the three types of human beings, and by extension, the three kinds of civilizations: the intellectual, the spiritual and heroic, and finally, the hedonistic. For the Italian philosopher, our modern Western civilization belonged to the last of these types, preoccupied with what

<sup>46</sup> See Guénon, “The Fissures in the Great Wall,” in *The Reign of Quantity*, 172-173. As Guénon notes, the symbolism of the protective power of the Great Wall is to be found in more than one religious tradition. For Guénon Gog and Magog find their equivalents in the Hindu demons, Koka and Vikoko, the similarity of whose names he also draws attention to. See 173.

<sup>47</sup> Julius Evola, *Eros and the Mysteries of Love: The Metaphysics of Sex* (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1991 [first published in Italian in 1969]), 7-8.

<sup>48</sup> Evola, *Eros*, 9.

he called the “subpersonal” pleasures principally of the genitalia and the belly, or sex and nourishment.<sup>49</sup> Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) famously referred to these as the *shabwatayn*, the “two passions” or “desires,” from whose clutches the spiritual seeker must become free if her soul is to ascend into the higher reaches of the spiritual life, in his book of the *Reviving the Religious Sciences*, appropriately entitled *The Breaking of the Two Desires (Kasr al-shabwatayn)*. While one might legitimately contest Evola’s tripartite schema as a gross simplification of the possibilities of human society types, both Hedges and Guénon would agree that of the three categories, our society, at least in its present form, bears its greatest resemblance to the last of them. Its mass-consumerism and unquenchable thirst would be fitting illustrations for them of what Buddhism identifies as the fount of all suffering: *tanha*, which is to say, “craving” or “desire.”



In his chapter on the “Illusion of Happiness,” Hedges turns to critically analyze the burgeoning field of what has come to be known as “positive psychology.” While this may be one of the weaker sections of the book, it is not without its merits. Within the history of modern Western psychology, positive psychology, the focal point of which is the study of positive states and emotions, is a relatively recent development. Throughout much of its history, the generally tendency of specialists in the discipline was to focus on negative states, emotions and pathologies—a point made by Abraham Maslow when he observed that the “science of psychology has been far more successful on the negative than the positive side. It has revealed to us much about man’s shortcomings, his illnesses, his sins, but little about his potentialities, his virtues, his achievable aspirations.”<sup>50</sup> While Maslow’s remark was made in 1954, it took decades before psychologists began to seriously make efforts to explore the nature and range of positive human emotions and states, giving birth to positive psychology.

In its more practical applications, the aim of positive psychology has

<sup>49</sup> Evola, *Eros*, 7-8. For Guénon, Evola would have likely been mistaken in differentiating the “intellectual” from the truly “spiritual.”

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Shane Lopez and Matthew Gallagher, “A Case for Positive Psychology,” in Shane Lopez and C. R. Snyder, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

been to enable people to live healthier and happier lives by developing generally optimistic attitudes about life. While this in itself is not a problem, Hedges's main qualm is the way the science is being used by corporations and others involved in the "Positivity Movement" essentially to induce feelings of happiness and contentment through contrived strategies and modes of thinking. Their harm lies in the fact that they are not conducive to creating objective experiences of reality. The "movement embraces self-delusion," writes Hedges, "as psychologically and socially beneficial."<sup>51</sup> "Positive psychology," he notes later in the chapter, "is about banishing criticism and molding a group into a weak and malleable unity that takes orders. Personal values, those nurtured by an independent conscience, are gently condemned as antagonistic to harmony and happiness."<sup>52</sup>

The weakness in Hedges's critique is that he does not seem to sufficiently distinguish between positive psychology as a science based on research and empirical evidence (what Maslow seems to have had in mind), and the movement spawned by the science, one which very easily lends itself to turning a blind eye to very real, concrete social, political, and individual problems. Moreover, he tends to ignore the fact that the cultivation of feelings of gratitude and contentment within moderation, encouraged by virtually all of the great religious and contemplative traditions of the world, can actually be very conducive to human well-being. Instead of creating illusions, they can awaken a recognition of blessings for which one might otherwise remain oblivious.<sup>53</sup> However, as already noted, Hedges's analysis is not without its own strengths. Most importantly, it lies in the way in which he draws attention to the illusions that modes of thinking fostered by positive psychology can create when taken to extremes, leading to the espousal of a warped sense of reality which in the end prevents one from recognizing the dire state of the modern world. Equally astute is Hedges in the manner in which he highlights the dangers inherent in pursuing transitory emotional states of gratification and happiness instead of higher ethical and teleological ends—ends which often come at the price of hardship, discomfort and unease. No doubt,

<sup>51</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 122.

<sup>52</sup> Hedges, *Empire*, 129.

<sup>53</sup> See my article, "On Cultivating Gratitude (*Shukr*) in Sufi Virtue Ethics," *Journal of Sufi Studies* (forthcoming).

this is a point over which Guénon and Hedges would have been in agreement.



Constraints of space prevent us from foraying into other aspects of Hedges's deeply conscientious critique in *Empire*, whether it involves the growth of "junk politics" or the proliferation of Reality TV, the rise of the "cult of the celebrity" or the blending of conventional with tabloid news. The themes which have been examined in this review, nevertheless, provide a sense of Hedges's eye for discerning what is most troubling about modern culture, and the reader can likely intuit the direction in which he would take most of his objections.

Some may find fault in the attempt which has been made in the present article to compare the views of Guénon with those of Hedges on the grounds that, because of their contrasting political and intellectual orientations, such a comparison is superficial at best and misleading at worst. It is true that one cannot overlook the real differences which characterize their outlooks. Hedges is a self-professed socialist who has often been associated with the far Left. Even though he has been a vociferous critic of the New Atheists and hardline secularists, his criticisms stem more from a dogmatism he feels they share with religious fundamentalists, as well as their political alignment with the Christian Right, than any elaborate metaphysical certainties of his own. Moreover, while he does not espouse utopian visions of the future rooted in a dogma of progress, neither is he not an advocate of tradition either, let alone a Primordial Tradition. Guénon, on the other hand, articulated a highly sophisticated metaphysical doctrine of the degenerative unfolding of time, and as is well known, was one of the leading voices of Tradition. And while he has sometimes been associated—no doubt through an aberrant reading of his own doctrines—with the far Right in Europe, he had little interests of his own in modern politics.

Yet, despite these divergences, what both thinkers share is a deep seated discontentment with the state of the modern world. And where they meet even more intimately is the extent to which a sense of the Sacred infuses their own critique of it. Moreover, their dismal evaluations of the state of the modern world may be viewed as rather complementary. Trained in mathematics and philosophy, Guénon focused primarily

on principles and formulated an elaborate metaphysical critique of it, drawing heavily on the wisdom traditions of the world. Hedges on the other hand is a seasoned journalist who has travelled the globe and witnessed first-hand concrete symptoms of the crisis of which the Frenchman wrote so prolifically about. In his various books and articles, the Pulitzer Prize winning author often describes in vivid detail exactly what he sees wrong with the world today, whether the scalpel of his razer-sharp analysis is directed at dissecting the gross disparity of wealth which separates the rich from the poor, environmental disasters brought about at the hands of corporations, the moral collapse of America, or the circus of contemporary politics. If Guénon provided a conceptual foundation upon which to erect a critique of the modern world, Hedges has given us knowledge of the intricacies of where things have gone wrong on the ground. And if, as far as weaknesses go, Guénon is to be accused of being too abstract and speculative in his own meditations, Hedges may be accused of not sufficiently rooting his own moral convictions, the basis of his critical evaluations, on more solid theoretical footing. Indeed, while the recently ordained minister draws from the rich ethical teachings of Christ, he often takes the ethical premises of a socially conscious, ecumenical, and somewhat personal interpretation of Christianity, and by extension the Abrahamic traditions, as axiomatic. This may not pose a problem for those who agree with him (and it is hard not to), but it does open him up to the charge of not being philosophically refined or sophisticated enough in his own critical appraisals. This is where Guénon's more theoretical approach, which interrogates the foundations of the modern world, exposing the shaky ground on which much of it rests, serves as a necessary complement to the kind of critique which Hedges engages in, since it provides the conceptual apparatus through which it may be more convincingly carried out—at least, that is to say, without having to rely on what some might argue are no more than sentimental appeals to secularized residues of a religious past.

The point of intersection where Guénon and Hedges seem to converge most closely lies in their dismal prediction of the future. The apocalyptic tone which marks *Empire of Illusion*, jarring no doubt to some readers, but also very different in intent, orientation and purpose from that of the Christian Right, of whom Hedges is in any case a vocal and vociferous critic, calls to mind, in remarkable fashion, Guénon's own prophetic

tone. "The conclusion is obvious," he wrote in the *Crisis of the Modern World*, "this world will come to a tragic end, unless a change as radical as to amount to a complete reversal of direction should intervene, and that very soon."<sup>54</sup> The words could just as easily have been lifted from any one of Hedges's recent writings.

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<sup>54</sup> Guénon, *Crisis*, 94.