

Bush as Baroque Special Effects: (December 23, 2000)¹

Media and Aliens

From Baroque theater to global tourism today, special effects have re-peated one plot point most of all. The audience is immersed on a labyrinthine path. The path offers them the illusion of free will; but the options are irretrievably controlled. In nineties movies, this control was central to the story: worlds run by puppet masters of one kind or another; perhaps by aliens from another solar system; or in the *Blade Runner* genre, by cyborgs who outsmart their makers. In fact, these aliens were fashioned by transnational media companies. The trans-companies were not so much alien as obsessed with feedback systems of all sorts (thus cyber-games, theme parks, tourist streets, remote controls, cell phones; and after 2011, simulation scenarios for homeland rule, for wars on terrorism and in the Middle East).

In these stories (cyberpunk and after: 1982–2000) special-effects aliens play power tricks with a viewer. But they play sneakily, or so the story goes; they work their evil with a velvet glove—quietly, ergonomically. Like dozens of “matrix” films over the past twenty years, ergonomic secrecy lets the citizen pretend to be freely in control. But meanwhile, behind the scenes (in our imagination at least) feedback “experts” pull the strings. They tend to look like diabolical spinmeisters, brand-makers, social imagineers, perhaps bald and varicose in *Dark City*, or corporate and buff in *The Matrix*. They speak in monotone, as if they were Artificial Intelligence; but they are closer to media researchers invading from hell.

Meanwhile, the simulation industries that inspired these movie fantasies—and political spin—continued testing their systems, particularly in the “burgeoning field of Complex Adaptive Systems” (CASS).² In 2000, a CASS system called Smart II predicted California’s electricity price spikes—a per-

verse claim, of course, since these prices were utterly artificial, manipulated directly by energy companies like Enron. Smart II must have had interesting inside data; or, like many polling systems these days, it managed to come up with precisely the answer that conservative ideologues require. The world is not spoiled by greed, the story goes. In fact, greed is logical, sensible, and a sign of a clean conscience. Pure greed is pure.

Smart CASS systems are simulation tools. They help researchers study “the behavior and interactions of individual agents—a single decision-making entity such as a consumer, company or product within a larger system.” Then they write scripts, not unlike scriptwriters for a movie. They build “models” about patterns that come with “extreme events.”³ They also have helped reimagine ancient Mesopotamia (ca. 2500 B.C.E). CASS is being used for terrorist network remodeling, for counter-drug simulation modeling (for combating the South American drug trade).

In July 2002, President Bush visited a leading CASS company called Argonne, “to learn about homeland-security technologies, and Argonne’s SMART tools (research funded by the Department of Defense).”⁴

Similarly on 9/11, at the CIA, four miles from Douglas Airport in Washington, the strategic gaming division of the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) was “running a preplanned military simulation.”⁵ They were testing what might be done if “a plane (leaving from Dulles) were to strike a building.” However, fifty minutes before simulated launch, American Airlines Flight 77 actually took off from Dulles, and was crashed by terrorists into the Pentagon.

As early as October of 2000, the Pentagon itself tested out a simulation scenario that pointed toward terrorism like 9/11. Many computer stores actually had military simulation games for sale, even games that could crash a plane through a building (Microsoft’s Flight Simulator may have helped prepare 9/11 bombers). Anyway, this sim scenario from the Pentagon was an emergency response software program called FDon Scene. As a further irony, FDon Scene was used in 1998 by the Texas Fire Chiefs Association as a “consequence management system”; even more ironically, it had been developed by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), who had sponsored what eventually became the Internet.⁶

Today, simulation in media has evolved into a precision tool that exercises enormous political power. This tool can fake wars or break treaties. On TV, it works as an imminent—not a servant—of power. It operates practically as an *instrument* with its own kingdom, by its own authority, in a theater as politically coherent as Baroque special effects. That is not to say that the goals are

coherent, only that its special effects have achieved a precision that reminds me of perspective awry or immersion in 1600. Those who use special effects may be corrupt and self-destructive; but they know their own political mind very well indeed. They can maneuver public opinion on a scale that is as startling as any disaster film I have ever seen (and that includes thousands of blow-'em-up movies, animations, installations).

Of course, one case study disturbed my sleep more than any other. I should take us there for a few pages, back to the American presidential election in 2000. (I will cannibalize from an article that I wrote in December, before George W. Bush was perfected as a special effect.) You understand of course that this is before Bush earned his spurs by chasing down the Axis of Evil and terrorism between one orange alert or another.

Election 2000

The year 2000 was more than a wake-up call for this book. I refashioned various chapters afterward. But weirder still, my research fit better than ever before, as if I had been getting ready to explain 2000. Not enough changes were needed, considering how grave the shock has been to the American system. The evidence was not pointing toward hyperbole: it was simply explaining how the Electronic Baroque, in a dissolving world of electronic feudalism, was inventing a civilization based more on hierarchy than on middle-class fantasies of democracy.

I have to confess: Throughout the election season, I began to literally have Bush-mares. Johnson had never invaded my sleep, even when I was practically staring the draft board in the face. Nor did Nixon, not even Reagan. Bush was immediately different. The presidential election haunted me, because it absolutely fit every category of special effects that I had located over the past four hundred years. Baroque trompe l'oeil had turned into cable, TV: Americans were invited to vote freely, watch freely; but behind the illusion, they were clearly being blindsided. It was as if computer-generated software had invented a president.

An uneasy alliance was set up between a fundamentalist wing of the Republican Party and global media (Murdoch, GE, Viacom, etc.), who offered the tools of special effects in order to coronate Prince George. The overall impact of many media had proven equally conservative as of 2000: the Internet; cybernetic data systems (retrieval systems and data filters of all sorts); even notions of virtual-

ity. The conservative patterns in media crept almost behind the scenes, upon the cultural and political world, through right-wing think tanks, talk radio, on the Web. But after 1998, during the great Penistgate crisis, as millions wondered if indeed, Paula Jones knew precisely the shape and tilt of Clinton's penis—and would this be broadcast over the Web—the sheer weight of virtualized fundamentalism began to be felt.

Media in its new alliances was not anarchic, not innocent, not a noosphere.⁷ Perhaps eventually it might repair the Gutenberg schizizophrenia,⁸ but not in 2000.

To get our bearings, we refer back to McLuhan's praise for instant replay. What had it evolved into by 2000, during the media watch after the election, its potential to "retrieve meaning"?⁹ Similarly, the implosion promised by McLuhan—then ironically turned more apocalyptic by Baudrillard¹⁰—was indeed ominous: the American presidency imploded while global media stepped in, to obviate the old constitutional balance of power (never that egalitarian to begin with), and remake the America presidency in time for Christmas. The election of 2000 came closer to what McLuhan called (1964) "a desperate and suicidal amputation, as if the central nervous system could no longer depend on the physical organs to be protective buffers against the slings and arrows of outrageous mechanism."¹¹

I do not want to sound melodramatic. That damages a critic's instincts. The last century, after all, delivered murder on a scale I hope we never approach again. Better to simply announce that the "cybernetic spectacles" promised by cyber-theorists as early as 1967 had taken a somewhat surprising turn in the U.S. V.H. Blix felt that these spectacles, enhanced by data feedback, reveal social systems as clearly as "unraveling the mysteries of the physical sciences."¹² But by 2003, we find an unraveling of another sort entirely—a spectacle even more universalized and coherent than anything even the Situationists had imagined in 1967, on the eve of a near revolution in France.

Perhaps a different quote from McLuhan might take us closer to the spirit of the crisis (1954):¹³

Nobody yet knows the language inherent in the new technological culture; we are all deaf-blind ... in terms of the new situation. Our most impressive words and thoughts betray us by referring to the previously existent, not the present. We are back in Acoustic Space.

Or as another twist, perhaps we have achieved what McLuhan meant by the “iconic absolutism of ‘Being’” replacing the older sequential process, “the chiaroscuro of ‘Becoming.’”¹⁴ But this absolutism is delivered as special effects—gaudy media as Being. And these effects, by 2000, had begun to flatten the American democratic access, by marketing the presidency as Becoming. Baroque spectacle in 1620 was used in much the same way, on behalf of its monarchs. It also spoke for a fundamentalist madness that had it both ways.” Like global media since 2000, it couched the act of Becoming inside the absolutism of Being, of knowing your place, or worshiping unrestricted capitalism as if it were Christianity in the first century:

Imagine the scripted spaces that we see in theming, in Vegas, in urban nostalgic planning, in computer games—also in cybernetics and game theory for war—turned into a Rapture for fundamentalists: the Bushie script promised eternal access to salvation through the middle class. But for that the government must erase all forms of social and cultural engineering since the New Deal (or perhaps since McKinley). Nineteenth-century imperialism was more God-fearing. The purity of nineteenth-century capitalism revealed biblical truth. Hallelujah brother, smite the evil.

Indeed, through the summer of 2000, this new system took shape in conservative headlines every day and grew into a Counter-Reformation after 9/11). To achieve the mission, George W Bush was literally being handled as Electronic Baroque special effects. And like all Baroque simulation, there was no problem about his style looking artificial. It was suggested that George W. Bush was honest because he looked out of place. An awkward enthusiasm was added to his honesty after 9/11, then a “heartfelt” response to the Enron scandal (another of his short speeches).

Of course, dishonesty is no longer much of a burden in the era of electronic Baroque. Apparently, there is no way to know internally how honest anyone is anyway. According to new theories in cognitive psychology, your brain does not chemically separate truth from fiction anyway.¹⁵ Special effects as Artifice may actually be a biological fact inside the brain. If you can convince yourself fully that you are telling the truth, the hormones in your brain are well satisfied, enough to bubble along normally.

With that principal in mind, I studied George W. Bush’s face for a few days. I noticed that Bush slept very well, compared to many earlier presidents, who looked half-dead to the world after a few months. This was probably not a tortured man. I suspect that the hormones inside his brain were as loyal as the

family butler. Here in political terms was being without becoming, the glory of an unexamined life.

Nevertheless, Bush's unexamined look could have been a handicap. So, his handlers in 2000 marketed him as too naive to be dangerously reactionary, or even treacherous. Karl Rove and other spinmeisters on his team decided to pitch Bush as a compassionate naïf. They had to justify his goggle-eyed stare in front of the camera, while commentators kept noticing his clumsiness. In 2000, when Bush read haltingly from the TelePrompTer, he projected an over sincere "deer in the headlights" look. He reminded me of the animatronic Lincoln at Disneyland. One reporter called it "the soft bigotry of low expectations."

But after 9/11, and the "invasion of Iraq," he added a blunt give-'em hell style. At the same time, he put on the imperial ermine. He needed to mature, to come of age for the next "election." His new speeches were filled with lofty (and glitchy) asides about white hierarchy and classism on a global scale. This reinforced an uneasy alliance with fundamentalists. Meanwhile, being "profoundly" uninformed makes him a poster boy for offshore America; a feudal/Baroque disregard that has outgrown the borders of the United States.

Bush serves as the avatar for the U.S. global brand, for the growing number of transnational companies that never file taxes in the US, but harvest their profits here.

Consider what this means as an instrumental fact in 2003: The United States needs to be a coherent nation state to save itself. As of March 2003, New York City hovered near bankruptcy. The state of Oregon cut a month off its school year. Hospitals and fire departments were cutting back fiercely throughout the U.S. Iraq is already being treated as the next state of the union, even while the nation fractures into oblivion.

This post-2000 style of global illusionism fiercely resembles special effects in late-Baroque palaces circa 1740—where "visitors" to Würzburg were reminded that their prince bishop¹⁶ was unreachable, not of this earthly kingdom. Media in 2003 is mostly obedient: a gas circling the presidency, part of the alliance of the willing. Despite worldwide marches against the invasion, we see military and legal alliances growing Bush's presidency. The war news often resembles graphic animation (abstract animatics about death in video—on the bombing). Dots as flares make impact on abstract bridges and streets. Bombing news resembles a wall on a German Baroque church designed by Balthassar Neumann or the Assam brothers—to puff up the grandeur, to intimidate through Artifice at the start of each briefing on the war.

What a shift in tone! Global news media had absent-mindedly sponsored Bush's candidacy in 2000, through cheerful disinformation; buried stories: white noise (classic evasive stories about GE calling the election early at NBC, about a general blackout of information on the black vote in Florida, about the blackout of the recount by September 2001). Indeed, since the Reagan years, if not earlier, the TelePrompTer in American politics has become the talisman of power. The president stares into a theatrical machine that identifies the speechwriters and handlers as in charge. Staring into the prompter also means friendship, in the personality medium of television. Direct address gives the television screen its "intimacy." It speaks freely because it says very little. The audience gets the illusion that someone is looking them straight in the eye, really cares; but in truth, that someone is just squinting at a page of text.

The power of media texts expands beyond the nation itself. Like a monopoly, special-effects media and heavy industry have become inseparable, and transnational. Their combined presence has finally (and with great ease) evacuated the presidency itself. Whatever was once called the American belief in popular will—rule by vote—comes a distant second to entertainment as corporate illusion. Put another way: media special effects made possible the *appointment* of King George II Bush.

The election of 2004 may well be a coronation, especially if the Diebold voting machines alter the results. Can our constitution survive a simulated election? Its cave-ins after 2000 brought us two mostly illegal wars, and all sorts of monarchical head fakes. But is it still too early to call this total collapse? Can we shake ourselves awake? Bush as president-elect in 2001 waved at America with a look of surprise on his face. Like most Americans, I had lost many nights of sleep watching the crisis unfold. Something about the repetition of weak news only drew me deeper into the screen. At least forty-six legal actions ran at once. Clearly the Bush legal team was simply "running out the clock," not unlike the end of a fixed boxing match.

It was assumed that sample recounts would legally prove—as in Florida law—that manual recounts, as prescribed very clearly by law, would go forward. Somehow, they never did. Even though polls indicated that up to 60 and 70 percent of Americans were prepared to wait for the recount, news commentators, particularly on cable, kept announcing that "our patience is running thin."

Bush's team was merely doing what had worked in live TV formats since the Watergate hearings—to generate a fretful sense that the walls were closing in. Indeed, stretching "real time" is the hallmark of television as a crime

movie. That way, news takes on the immersive immediacy of special effects, like running away too slowly in a nightmare. The hallucinatory effect for viewers became addictive: no news follows no news; the clock kept ticking.

We should also understand this in a global context: endless news about international stock markets was interspersed throughout the election marathon. After all, transnational media is owned by men like Rupert Murdoch, by AOL / Warner, by Disney, by Bertelsmann. From that point of view, national news is dwarfed by the larger crisis of what world markets will “say” on Monday. The election begins to feel contingent on financial reports. With gamine and cheerful corporate faces, “hard” news has increasingly turned into a highly ideological brand of infotainment. And to add some spice, the message is couched by violent arguments reported in the pundit segments.

Within these seemingly adolescent encounters, the microphone presumably becomes the arbiter of truth. And throughout those thirty-seven days (and in the days since), the Republicans clearly dominated the microphone, particularly in Murdoch-owned stations (Fox News). The same stacked deck was evident in Florida, from the Republican legislature to Republicans showing the pace of counting ballots in the canvassing rooms themselves, to stalling tactics at court. Judge Sanders Saul, lingering for four precious days, had over a million ballots trucked up to Tallahassee, then refuses to see any of them. The U.S. Supreme Court, with three justices clearly linked to the Bush legal team, waits until two hours before the deadline (not even a real deadline, in fact) to call, the whole thing off.

While the U.S. Supreme Court listened to evidence, the mixture among the audience is revealing. Veterans from the legal team who set up the Christopher Commission Report in 1992—after the Rodney King beating in L.A.—sat next to Representative Henry Hyde, who led the impeachment hearings against Clinton. But the camera avoids these coincidences, barely covers Jesse Jackson’s rallies in Tallahassee, constantly reminds the audience that trusting in stable government may save us all. Pundits hoped for a short collective memory. They continually emphasized the need for order and timeliness. It was fiercely selective coverage—keep the audience nervous about running late, repeat let’s get started no matter who wins. Almost nothing about policy can arrive. Most Americans are still not quite certain what are Gore’s tax plans, medical policies.

Very little news gathering went on. The crowd menacing the Miami-Dade canvassing board was not interviewed in any coherent way—nor those outside who saw the van arrive, heard things (that would have taken no more than an

hour to gather). The *L.A. Times* ran a story where someone admitted to voting once in Florida (by absentee ballot), and once more in another state. A student in Wisconsin claimed he voted four times. Apparently, 36,000 absentee ballots in Indiana may be bogus; some are registered to dead people.

None of this, nor the voter repression and unequal treatment of African Americans in Florida, are followed up at all (certainly not for more than five minutes), compared to a hundred hours of repartee from political surrogates. Clearly, 60 percent or more of these “experts” favoring Bush, usually selected by the Bush team; or through conservative think tanks, who now become news providers for up to 70 percent of the cable news, and often still do in 2003. Thus in 2000, the news itself became a political labyrinth, a myth of freedom of expression beneath a feedback system dominated by business. Like TV psychics, cable news claimed to represent public taste, the public will, even the integral reality of the United States. But actually, it spoke for globalized special effects, that floats like a gas from one continent to the other.

However the Bush presidency will play its hand in 2004 and afterward—with some effect, no effect, or in utter gridlock—the American federal government will stay wounded for most of the decade, even into 2020. The crisis is similar to the election of 1876, when no president could be proven by the popular vote. The shock echoed for twenty-five years, and nourished a wave of Jim Crow racism in the 1890s. But today, the United States is the most powerful economic and military kingdom since the Roman Empire. This will go far beyond Jim Crow.

As of December 2000, it was clear that Florida was almost uncountable, but may have voted for Gore. Yet the media anointed Bush in the early morning after the election. It seemed improbable that anyone else could be president. Finally, a consortium of newspapers would fully count the votes in Florida. Along with various scandals in the mail-in ballots, and in the butterfly ballots and in African American ballots, the complete vote tally apparently indicated that Bush did *not* win in Florida. And toward end of September 2001, the results of this vote were to be released generally. For September 15, major news magazines were preparing to discuss the meltdown of George W. Bush, whose approval rating had dipped below 50 percent in August. Then with 9/11, all of that was repressed, on behalf of a grieving, traumatized nation.

For a moment in late November 2000, the endless wait for action and clarity had become a national joke. In a comedy skit on *Saturday Night Live*, the imaginary Gore surprises the imaginary Bush team, who declares: “I thought you were dead.” No, the imaginary Gore explains, “I only act that way.” The al-

legory of a dead election is constantly repeated; it becomes part of the crime scenario. Endless jokes that the election was stolen, or simply fell victim to alien forces. In “real life,” the imaginary president takes to the podium. The election as special-effects crime movie: after eight years of Clinton-watching as crime movie, from Whitewater to that inane Penistgate, the movie was re-scripted. The Baroque pageant began unencumbered by the fragile balance of power that used to be part of the American system. While the management changed reels, Americans were invited to shop for Christmas.

Advertisers breathed a sigh of relief. The country prepared for a horizontal split in authority: the presidency would assume a war-powers version of monarchy, while the rest of the country would be set loose in a feudal state of fiscal bankruptcy. It is possible that the bottom may achieve more democracy, while the top turns to Baroque hierarchy. Finally, by 2002, clearly the Bush administration had better relations with Russia and Saudi Arabia than with California. The colonization of America by its own economy had taken another step forward. Indeed, the world had left the twentieth century from two ends, as I often say—into the future and into the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), at the apex of the fundamentalist madness during the Baroque.

Talk Show

There is a classic saying in American journalism: “If it bleeds, it leads.” If the news does not resemble crime movies, or at least celebrity scandals, the audience might flip the dial. That was certainly true of the election coverage on TV. While the Election 2000 shows ran wall-to-wall for months, they were more like a search for criminality than a detailed election. They relied on tactics seen in the Clinton impeachment hearings, or even in the O.J. Simpson trial.

Also, admittedly, the Florida vote fiasco was too over-melodramatic even for noir cinema. Long before the election, the coverage was already perverse. From the mid-seventies, a coalition of investors, many from the South, had been supporting conservative think tanks, that in turn had begun to filter the news in the nineties for cable channels.

Imagine a Baroque auto-da-fé turned into group therapy. The Inquisition explains which candidate is a mess this week, while the countdown for “the fire next week” keeps the audience glued to the screen. As millions of Americans noted, throughout this thirty-seven-day cycle, the policies of the candidates were rarely mentioned at all. Presumably, in terms of policy, Gore might win.

But if it became a question of character, Bush would win (he being the man of relatively unblemished character, almost in a state of innocence). It turned into a campaign about character, whose way of staring into the screen the voters ought to prefer. We essentially never learned if Gore's "fuzzy math" was actually fuzzy, or if Bush's math was a return to what his father called "voodoo economics." That would have taken research journalism. The media are no longer hired as journalists. They are hired generally as infotainment and talk-show hosts. Thus, the "spin" of the campaigns was matched by even more spin on TV. As a result, the viewer was distracted. The brawl and chatter between far right and very moderate left turned the issues into screaming fits and media-genic food fights, into blind theatricality. Oliver North was brought in to discuss constitutional theory; then years later, given a series on how Americans went to war, to prepare us for the heroism to come.

Special effects are not supposed to be too sugary. As I pointed out earlier, even Disneyland always added touches of *memento mori* to its attractions, some black light lifted from horror films, a few monsters between the cuteness, a haunted house with a version of Pepper's Ghost (projecting the hereafter through glass). Every big-budget special-effects film, even comedies, needs blood-soaked moments, whimsical Beetlejuice journeys into death. As the audience knows, *deus ex machina*: death is entertaining because Artifice makes the effect reassuring. The more artificial, clearly over the top, death coverage becomes on cable news, the more soothing to many Americans. Like all Baroque special effects, terror invites reassurance. The apparatus that delivers artificial death reveals the power of the prince.

One might ask, of course, is 2003 farther along than 2000? What is the absolute limit of this advancing crisis? Global media companies now sit at the table as equals with the nation state. Like yellow journalism in 1898, media can arbitrate wars, global business interests, warlord capitalism. Everything is breaking news. Time is getting compressed. Ten minutes ahead begins to look like long-range planning. Thus—to repeat—the United States Constitution was temporarily but severely restructured, through an uneasy alliance between a fundamentalist wing of the Republican Party and global media, to maintain a cybernetic blackout, in order to keep shopping alive for Christmas and remove more of the imploded nation-state from any restriction of business, if at all possible. Global capitalism can only succeed if it is allowed to operate in its own oxygen, as purely without controls as the Internet itself, the emblem of the Electronic Baroque, just as special effects are its civilization.

Trauma as Entertainment: May 2, 2003

By April, the war in Iraq has “ended.” However, the mopping-up operation is busily falling apart. A news blackout continues. On May 2, Bush appears on the deck of an aircraft carrier near Iraq. He is reenacting the end of World War II. Like a squadron leader, his hair tousled, he poses in a flier’s suit. A huge banner draped behind him reads “Mission Accomplished.” He then delivers a canned speech. It promises years of costly and destabilizing occupation ahead. The whole thing reads like TV double-speak. A sunny commercial will announce the new miracle drug. At the same time, a voice over rapidly lists every possible side effect. Grinning soldiers crowd around Bush for a final media blitz, to squeeze more juice out of the trauma and confusion about to strike the United States.

Reactions to Bush’s flyboy scripted space are dull. A mood of neo-Victorian fussiness has taken over in the U.S., along with the opening of bland sequels to *X-Men* and *The Matrix*. The country is frozen in a *tableau vivant*—clearly a symptom. For the next volume, I will undoubtedly follow the history of trauma as entertainment, from 1620 to the present. We live from one revenge drama to the next.

Just as this book was in its final stages of production, the California recall election swept Arnold Schwarzenegger into office. His campaign, essentially a string of coming attractions, has momentarily turned him into a Baroque prince. It is both a parody and a coming of age of political special effects. Despite his take-charge presence on screen, “the angry streak” in California is still brewing. Its state government has been shrunken down to the size of a special effects movie. Meanwhile, another suicide bombing in Baghdad kills ten. Rumors promise a “gold rush” for American companies in Iraq. The news dissolves from one emerging improbability to another. There is no point even changing cameras. Nearly the same special effects camouflage all messages, from elections to shopping. What a perverse action movie all this will make ten years from now!

2003 Versus 2023: The Absentminded Future

In the 2003 edition, I describe a man entering a “smart room,” “where cybernetic timers control the lights, the shades, and more. “He joins “it.” “It” joins him. His house becomes a membrane, as alert to his needs as a special effect. In the

next few years, this miniaturization will become more apparent. Perhaps we will turn into one-celled animals. The collapse of paradox that all this implies is too fanciful. It will not happen. Something even more fanciful and risky will happen instead. I am no longer convinced that we are dissolving as a culture. Special effects are simple enough to humanize, though it will take time, while the next peculiar era unfolds.

As I complete this second edition, it is February 2023. I was too optimistic. That room with membranes has clearly arrived, but it is not a room after all. It is AI remaking our memories, our response mechanisms, our politics. AI will be the last time where neoliberalism can flourish on pure oxygen. But how long will that be? This book covers how scripted spaces operated over the past five hundred years. It focused on the West, but could easily now focus on the East as well. Today, the political impact of scripted spaces is accelerating. In 2003, despite its Electronic Baroque, the political uses of illusion were much simpler.

In 2007, I started a book on “the dismantling of the American psyche.” I then devoted sixteen years to researching how America’s psychic collapse might be stopped. But 2010, with its Tea Party gridlock, looked even more down that malevolent rabbit hole than 2007. Then came 2015, and 2021. Fighting this f/x disaster will require a very long game plan—easily another fifty years. That game plan will also require knowledge of the past five hundred years of scripted spaces—how the dialects of Western illusion were refined, even as the specter of the West dissolved into something else.

