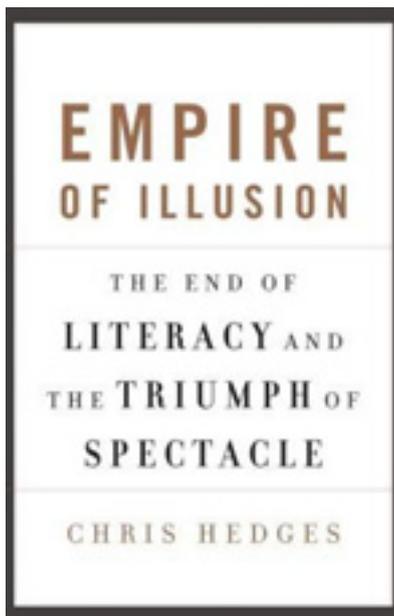


Chris Hedges' *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*

Caridad Svich | Nopassport Theatre Alliance And Press

Hedges, Chris. *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*. New York: Nation Books, 2009. 240 pages. \$24.95 paper.



In this impassioned, mournful book, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges laments a nation overrun by morally nihilistic, late capitalist “spectacle” and cries out for a crucial re-investment in and examination of the foundations of democracy. He begins the book with an essay on professional wrestling and celebrity culture. Through his dissection of pro wrestling’s apparatus of gender-based personas, calibrated exaltation of false realities, and complicit relationship with its audience, Hedges frames the argument for his book in no-nonsense terms and establishes the tone and voice of this tough-minded, ardent book on the decline and decay of US culture.

For those familiar with Hedges’ previous work, this volume may not come as a surprise. He’s a wonderfully clear-eyed writer and his book-length works in particular are characterized by a canny combination of his leftist, journalistic sensibility and on-the-ground perspective with a more rueful, yet passionate survey-like approach to bigger topics intimated or highlighted directly in his stories from the field. *Empire of Illusion* shares with previous works *American Fascists* (2007) and *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (2002) the kind of energy and timely motivation that makes Hedges’ writing so

compelling. What it lacks perhaps is the urgency not of polemical argument, which the book has in abundance, but of more profound theoretical cross-referencing.

Hedges rails to immediate effect against celebrity culture, pervasive corporate influence and shallow entertainment, and argues that the people of the United States have already bought into and are living inside an illusion within a culture of illusions. Hedges' articulate reminder, intended for a general readership, is pre-dated, of course, by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and nearly every cultural theorist that has furthered, countered, or merely riffed on Debord's argument ever since, from Baudrillard to Žižek. It has been evident for some time that what began in the Situationists' case as a critique of spectacle was consumed and absorbed into Western culture, so that the modes of initial critique were actually used toward rather than against the creation of even more spectacle, thus magnifying the levels of illusion in which Hedges argues most in the US transnational "empire" of commodity/commodities live.

If Hedges fails to position his argument strongly enough within an already-established line of critical thinking and philosophy, *Empire of Illusion*, nevertheless, still has the necessary effect of a cultural wake-up call, due to Hedges' strong and fiery writing. His doomsday message is loud, clear, and effective, and his hope-against-all-hope humanist plea for a culture that will once again rise up and find its way back toward literacy and enlightenment is moving. His chapter on Martha Stewart, for instance, and the cult of image-based celebrity stresses how Stewart has constructed a persona of pure affect that maintains an elegantly insidious illusion of elegance, civility, and propriety (a deliberate neo-1950s call to women's role in the domestic sphere), holding herself up as a model for the United States homemaker while abandoning altogether the day-to-day realities of home and family relationships. Hedges exposes Stewart as a shallow icon emblematic of a culture that prizes a commodified appearance over an individual of real substance. Stewart is an easy target. Nevertheless, given that Hedges is definitely aiming for a general, sophisticated reader, Stewart is a convenient and complex (given her willful construction of self) example upon which he can build his argument.

Hedges' *Empire of illusion* is a welcome contribution to the field of cultural studies. While it aims to speak powerfully to a contemporary phase of scholarly debate on US empire during the post-Cold War era, the book's chief strength is its focus on and critique of popular culture and the notion of spectacle. At times Hedges' rhetoric, especially in later chapters, becomes overblown; for instance, he equates pornography with the torture at Abu Ghraib. Nevertheless, his elegiac shout is a fully felt and bracing lament to a nation of citizens who may actually prefer the comfort of illusions to the hard, grassroots work of reinvigorating the democratic ideals upon which the United States was founded.

Caridad Svich is a US Latina playwright-translator-lyricist and editor. Her stage adaptation of Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* is currently in rep at Repertorio Español in New York City. She is editor of several books on theater and performance from TCG, Manchester

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University Press, Smith & Kraus, and BackStage Books. She is alumna playwright of New Dramatists, founder of NoPassport Theatre Alliance and Press, associate editor of Contemporary Theatre Review (Routledge), and contributing editor of TheatreForum. She holds an MFA from UCSD.