

THE HUNTING PARTY

WHY UNCERTAINTY IS MAKING HUNTERS IMPORTANT AGAIN

CHRIS KEMPT

PROMOTIONAL EXTRACTS FROM *THE HUNTING PARTY*

Reality as the medium

Adam Curtis, hypernormalisation and the architecture of belief

The Hunting Party explores why some people notice patterns, risks and possibilities that others miss. In this extract from Chapter 8, 'Reality as the Medium', Chris Kempt considers how Adam Curtis's work led him to see propaganda not only as a contest between truth and lies, but as the construction of the environment in which people attempt to establish what is real.

CHAPTER 8 / PAPERBACK PP. 63 AND 68-70

EXTRACT 1 / CHAPTER 8 / P. 63

For most of my life, when I thought about propaganda, I thought about lies. Somebody has a version of events they want you to believe, reality is inconvenient, so they replace the inconvenient parts with something more useful. The obvious defence is truth: find the lie, expose it, produce the evidence and, eventually, reality wins.

I still think that is true a lot of the time, but it assumes manipulation is primarily about changing the answer. Vladislav Surkov made me wonder whether the more interesting move is changing the environment in which the answer gets formed.

I first came across him properly through Adam Curtis. Surkov had moved through theatre, advertising, business and eventually the Kremlin, where he became closely associated with the political theatre of Putin-era Russia. Exactly how much of the mythology around him belongs personally to Surkov is difficult to separate from the mythology he was apparently rather good at cultivating, which is almost annoyingly appropriate. I don't think he was some supernatural puppet master secretly controlling everything that happened in Russian politics, and I am generally suspicious of explanations which become more impressive every time they become harder to falsify.

The bit that stuck with me was simpler. Traditional propaganda gives you a story and tries to make you believe it. The version associated with Surkov seemed much less concerned with everybody believing the same thing. Different groups could receive apparently incompatible stories, opposition could exist inside a system which was also shaping the conditions around that opposition, and confusion itself could become useful.

You don't necessarily need somebody to believe your version of reality if you can make it sufficiently difficult for them to establish a stable version of their own.

That connected very directly to what I had been thinking about in the previous chapter. Stories don't merely sit on top of perception. Once a story becomes established, it begins affecting which parts of a person or situation are easiest to see. The girl at school wasn't invisible and nobody had concealed her from me. The social frame around her had simply made some information much easier to notice than other information.

The same thing can happen to an entire information environment.

EXTRACT 2 / CHAPTER 8 / PP. 68-69

Hypernormal

Adam Curtis's broader use of hypernormalisation comes from Alexei Yurchak's work on the later Soviet Union, where official descriptions of the system could drift a very long way from lived experience while everybody continued participating because the structures around them still depended on the official version.

I recognise that at a much smaller scale inside organisations.

Everybody knows a project date is impossible, but the spreadsheet continues displaying it because moving the date would trigger an awkward conversation. Everybody knows a process doesn't work, but complying with the process remains easier than trying to change it. Everybody knows one person effectively makes all the decisions while the company continues describing itself as radically decentralised, or strongly suspects the customer doesn't want the thing being built but too much money and reputation have become attached to the existing plan for anybody to ask the question cleanly.

The strange thing is that a fiction can eventually stop needing active enforcement. People begin preserving it themselves because enough real things have become attached to it. Budgets, jobs, relationships and status can all depend on everybody continuing to behave as though the existing account remains true, which makes the distinction between the story and reality rather less clean than it first appears.

A currency is a shared human story, but I still wouldn't recommend testing that insight by refusing to pay the electricity bill. Organisational hierarchy is partly constructed, but somebody can still fire you. National borders exist because enormous numbers of people and institutions behave as though they exist, which does not make the person inspecting your passport imaginary.

Stories aren't simply the opposite of reality. They are one of the mechanisms human beings use to organise it.

That was the step I was missing when I thought propaganda was fundamentally about lies. If enough behaviour, incentives and institutions become organised around a particular interpretation, changing the interpretation can produce real effects even when the underlying claim is arguable, incomplete or invented.

The story has entered the machinery, which also explains why simply exposing the story doesn't necessarily make the machinery disappear. By then there may be mortgages, careers, organisations, laws, friendships or entire identities attached to it.

Facts still matter. They just don't operate in an empty room.

EXTRACT 3 / CHAPTER 8 / PP. 69-70

The artist and the audience

This is where Surkov becomes more interesting to me as somebody with an artistic background than as a cartoon political villain.

Again, I don't want to turn one unusually interesting political operator into a universal explanation for Russian politics. The version of Surkov which reached the West is part documented figure and part mythology, and he seems to have contributed enthusiastically to both. What interests me is the artistic way of thinking about the relationship between the thing being created and the people experiencing it.

A conventional painting sits in front of you and you respond to it. Performance art can make your response part of what is happening, so the setting, the audience, the institutional reaction and the argument afterwards become difficult to separate from the original object. Games go further because the audience acts inside the system. The player isn't merely receiving the work. Their behaviour completes it.

Once politics is approached in that way, the population stops looking like a passive audience consuming propaganda and starts looking like participants inside the medium. Opposition, outrage, mockery and disbelief can all become inputs, and you don't necessarily need to suppress every opposing voice if the opposition itself still produces useful behaviour inside the larger structure.

Somebody can believe they are resisting the system while their reaction remains entirely legible to it.

That is what I find unsettling about the Surkov model. Ordinary censorship treats opposition as something outside the system which has to be removed. A more sophisticated system can allow opposition to remain visible while shaping the environment in which that opposition operates, and in that sense the argument itself becomes part of the scenery.

This doesn't mean every political conflict is secretly theatre, or that genuine opposition ceases to exist, and it certainly doesn't mean one person can reliably control what millions of people think. Reality is far too complicated for that, and this is exactly the kind of idea which becomes dangerous when it is allowed to explain everything.

The useful part is narrower. The environment around an argument can matter as much as the argument itself, sometimes more.

Once I started seeing that, it became difficult not to see smaller versions everywhere, which creates a problem of its own because eventually everything starts looking manipulated. That isn't insight. It is paranoia with a reading list.

THE HUNTING PARTY

Why Uncertainty Is Making Hunters Important Again

Chris Kempt



ABOUT THE BOOK

The Hunting Party: Why Uncertainty Is Making Hunters Important Again explores why some people see patterns, risks and possibilities that others miss, how stories and systems shape behaviour, and why minds adapted to uncertainty may matter more again as the world becomes less stable.

This extract discusses the influence of Adam Curtis's work on the author's thinking about propaganda, hypernormalisation and reality as an information environment.

Extracts from Chapter 8, 'Reality as the Medium' - paperback pp. 63 and 68-70.

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