

Empire of Illusion

*The End of Literacy
and the Triumph of Spectacle*

CHRIS HEDGES



Copyright © 2009 by Chris Hedges

Published by Nation Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group

116 East 16th Street, 8th Floor

New York, NY 10003

Nation Books is a co-publishing venture of the Nation Institute
and the Perseus Books Group

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of
this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written
permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical
articles and reviews. For information, address the Perseus Books Group,
387 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016-8810.

Books published by Nation Books are available at special discounts for
bulk purchases in the United States by corporations, institutions, and other
organizations. For more information, please contact the Special Markets
Department at the Perseus Books Group, 2300 Chestnut Street, Suite 200,
Philadelphia, PA 19103, or call (800) 810-4145, extension 5000,
or e-mail special.markets@perseusbooks.com.

Design and composition by Cynthia Young.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Hedges, Chris.

Empire of illusion :
the end of literacy and the triumph of spectacle / Chris Hedges.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-56858-437-9

1. Mass media—United States. 2. Popular culture—United States.
1. Title.

P92.U5H365 2009

302.23—dc22

2009013585

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Eunice,

soles occidere et redire possunt: nobis cum semel occidit brevis

lux, nox est perpetua una dormienda. da mi basia mille.



People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster.

—JAMES BALDWIN

Contents

I

The Illusion of Literacy 1

II

The Illusion of Love 55

III

The Illusion of Wisdom 89

IV

The Illusion of Happiness 115

V

The Illusion of America 141

Notes 195

Acknowledgments 205

Bibliography 209

Index 217

I / The Illusion of Literacy

Now the death of God combined with the perfection of the image has brought us to a whole new state of expectation. We are the image. We are the viewer and the viewed. There is no other distracting presence. And that image has all the Godly powers. It kills at will. Kills effortlessly. Kills beautifully. It dispenses morality. Judges endlessly. The electronic image is man as God and the ritual involved leads us not to a mysterious Holy Trinity but back to ourselves. In the absence of a clear understanding that we are now the only source, these images cannot help but return to the expression of magic and fear proper to idolatrous societies. This in turn facilitates the use of the electronic image as propaganda by whoever can control some part of it.

—JOHN RALSTON SAUL, *Voltaire's Bastards*¹

*We had fed the heart on fantasy,
The heart's grown brutal from the fare.*

—WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS,
The Stare's Nest By My Window

JOHN BRADSHAW LAYFIELD, tall, clean-cut, in a collared shirt and white Stetson hat, stands in the center of the ring holding a heavy black microphone. Layfield plays wrestling tycoon JBL on the World Wrestling Entertainment tour.² The arena is filled with hooting and jeering fans, including families with children. The crowd yells and

boos at JBL, who has had a long career as a professional wrestler. Many chant, "You suck! You suck! You suck!"

"Last week I made Shawn Michaels an offer, and I have yet to hear back from the Heartbreak Kid," drawls Layfield. Michaels, another WWE wrestler, is a crowd favorite. He is a self-professed born-again Christian with a working-man persona. "So earlier today I made Shawn Michaels an offer that was a lot easier to understand," Layfield continues. "I challenge Shawn Michaels to a street fight tonight! So Shawn, I know you're back there. Now what's your answer?"

"HBK, HBK, HBK!!!" the crowd intones. A pulsing rock beat suddenly shakes the arena as action shots of the Heartbreak Kid flash across the Titantron, the massive screen suspended over the ring. The crowd cheers, leaping up as Shawn Michaels, in jeans and an army-green shirt, whirls onstage, his long, blond hair flying. Pyrotechnics explode. The deafening sound system growls, "I know I'm sexy . . . I got the looks . . . that drive the girls wild. . . ."

Michaels bursts into the ring, fists pumping, stalking back and forth. The ref steps in to begin the match.

"HBK! HBK! HBK!" chants the crowd.

"Hold on, hold on, referee," Layfield says, putting his hand on the referee's shoulder. People in the crowd begin to heckle.

"Shawn," he says, "you got a choice to make. You can either fight me right now in this street fight, or you can do the right thing for you, your family, and your extended family, and take care of them in a financial crisis you never dreamed would happen a year ago today."

Michaels stands silently.

"You see, I know some things, Shawn," continues Layfield. "Rich people always do. Before this stock market crashed, nobody saw it coming, except, of course, my wife, but that didn't help you, did it? See, I was hoarding cash. I was putting money in gold. While most Americans followed the leader—blindly, stupidly followed the leader—I was making money. In fact, Shawn, I was prospering while you were following the herd, losing almost everything, right, Shawn?"

"Fight!! Fight!! Fight!! Fight!!" urges the crowd. Michaels looks hesitantly back and forth between the heaving crowd and Layfield.

"You lost your 401(k). You lost your retirement. You lost your nest egg. You lost *your children's education fund*," Layfield bellows into the

mic, his face inches from Michaels's. "You got to support your extended family, Shawn, and now you look around with all this responsibility, and you look at your beautiful wife, she's a beautiful lady, you look at your two little wonderful kids, and you wonder: 'How in the world . . . am I going to send them . . . to college?'"

Layfield pauses heavily. Michaels' face is slack, pained. Small, individual voices shout out from the crowd.

"Well, I've got an answer," Layfield goes on. "I'm offering you a job. I want you to come work—for me."

"No! No! No!" yells the crowd. Michaels blinks slowly, dazed, and lowers his eyes to the mat.

"See, there's always alternatives, Shawn. There's alternatives to everything. You can always wrestle until you're fifty. You might even wrestle till you're sixty. In fact, you could be a lot like these has-beens who are disgracing themselves in high school gyms all over the country, bragging about their war stories of selling the place out while they're hawking their eight-by-tens and selling Polaroids. Shawn, you could be that guy, or you could take my offer, because I promise you this: All the revenue that you're goin' to make off your DX T-shirts will not compare to the offer that I . . . made . . . to you."

He tells the Heartbreak Kid to look in the mirror, adding, "The years haven't been kind to you, have they, Shawn?" He reminds him that one more bad fall, one more injury, and "you're done, you're done."

The crowd begins to rally their stunned hero, growing louder and louder. "HBK! HBK! HBK!"

"What else can you really do besides this?" Layfield asks. "You get a second chance in life."

Layfield sweeps off his white Stetson. "Go ahead," he screams into Michaels's face. "Ever since you walked out here . . . people have been wantin' you to kick me in the face. So why don't you do it? I'm gonna give you a free shot, Shawn, right here."

The crowd erupts, roaring for the Heartbreak Kid to strike.

"HBK!! DO IT!! DO IT!! HBK!! HBK!!!"

"Listen to 'em. Everybody wants it. Shawn, it's what you want. You're twitching. You're begging to pull the trigger, so I'm telling you right now, take a shot! Take it!"

The Heartbreak Kid takes one step back, his stubbled face trembling, breathing rapidly like a rabbit. The crowd is leaping out of their seats, thrusting their arms in the air, holding up handmade banners.

“HBK!!! HBK!!! HBK!!!”

“Do it, Shawn,” Layfield hollers, “before it’s too late. This is your second chance, but understand this, understand this—”

“HBK!!! HBK!!! HBK!!!”

“—Listen to me and not them! If you take this shot . . . then this offer is off the table . . . forever.”

The crowd stops chanting. Different cries are heard: boos, shouts to attack, shouts to stop. There is no longer unity in the auditorium.

Layfield holds his head outstretched until the Heartbreak Kid slowly turns his back. Layfield leers. Shawn Michaels climbs through the ropes out of the ring and walks heavily back to the dressing room, his dull gaze on the ground.

“Lookin’ forward to doin’ business with ya, Shawn,” Layfield shouts after him.

The crowd screams.

Layfield, like most of the wrestlers, has a long, complicated fictional backstory that includes a host of highly publicized intrigues, fights, betrayals, infidelities, abuse, and outrageous behavior—including goose-stepping around the ring and giving the Nazi salute during a wrestling bout in Germany. But tonight he has come in his newest incarnation as the “self-made millionaire,” the capitalist, the CEO who walked away with a pot of gold while workers across the country lost their jobs, saw their savings and retirement funds evaporate, and fought off foreclosure.

As often happens in a celebrity culture, the line between public and fictional personas blurs. Layfield actually claims to have made a fortune as a stock market investor and says he is married to the “richest woman on Wall Street.” He is a regular panelist on Fox News Channel’s *The Cost of Freedom* and previously appeared on CNBC, not only as a celebrity wrestler but as a savvy investor whose conservative political views are worth airing. He also has written a best-selling book on financial planning called *Have More Money Now*. He hosts a weekend talk-radio program syndicated nationally by Talk Radio Network, in which he discusses politics.

The interaction between the crowd and Layfield is vintage professional wrestling. The twenty-minute bouts employ the same tired gimmicks, the same choreographed moves, the endless counts to two by the referee that never seem to get to three without the pinned wrestler leaping up from the mat to continue the fight. There is the desperate struggle of a prostrate wrestler trying to reach the hand of his or her partner to be relieved in the ring. This pantomime, with his opponent on his back and his arm outstretched, can go on for a couple of minutes. There are a lot of dirty shots when the referee is distracted—which is often.

The bouts are stylized rituals. They are public expressions of pain and a fervent longing for revenge. The lurid and detailed sagas behind each bout, rather than the wrestling matches themselves, are what drive crowds to a frenzy. These ritualized battles give those packed in the arenas a temporary, heady release from mundane lives. The burden of real problems is transformed into fodder for a high-energy pantomime. And the most potent story tonight, the most potent story across North America, is one of financial ruin, desperation, and enslavement of a frightened and abused working class to a heartless, tyrannical, corporate employer. For most, it is only in the illusion of the ring that they are able to rise above their small stations in life and engage in a heroic battle to fight back.

As the wrestlers appear and strut down the aisle, the crowd, mostly young, working-class males, knows by heart the long list of vendettas and betrayals being carried into the ring. The matches are always acts of retribution for a host of elaborate and fictional wrongs. The narratives of emotional wreckage reflected in the wrestlers' stage biographies mirror the emotional wreckage of the fans. This is the deep appeal of professional wrestling. It is the appeal of much of popular culture, from Jerry Springer to "reality" television to Oprah Winfrey. The narratives expose the anxiety that we will die and never be recognized or acclaimed, that we will never be wealthy, that we are not among the chosen but remain part of the vast, anonymous masses. The ringside sagas are designed to reassure us. They hold out the hope that we, humble and unsung as these celebrities once were, will eventually be blessed with grace and fortune.

The success of professional wrestling, like most of the entertainment that envelops our culture, lies not in fooling us that these stories