The Lure of Illusion

'Sometimes people don't want to hear the truth because they don't want their illusions destroyed.' [1]

roughly translated from Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) – German philosopher

'Acting is behaving truthfully under imaginary circumstances.'

Sanford Meisner, USA acting coach (1905- 1997)

in Centre Daily Times (State College, PA), January 17, 1983.

'You can't handle the truth!'

in 'A Few Good Men' 1992 movie – directed by Rob Reiner

When **a magician creates an illusion** (such as appearing to saw a woman in half, followed by her reappearing almost immediately in perfect health), **we know it must be a trick.**
But it is **believable** to the extent that **we thought we observed it happening before our eyes** … we just can't explain how it was done.

Acting is also an illusion because it is **believable** (albeit imaginary) as a skilled interpretive work of art. But **it is not true** … in the factual sense. It is a representation, however masterful and emotionally convincing.
So, **is truth unimportant?**
Is the impression on our emotions just as important as reality?
It is the world of WOW? The awe of an experience? The wonder of the dreams and aspirations?
Are we seeking **escapism** in the safety of a story … the risk-free adrenalin rush of thrilling experience?

It's a search for something beyond the **reality of life** … beyond the routine, the daily roller-coaster of living …? Is that what Nietzsche was implying?
The illusion is the attraction … the lure … the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow?

So, if an illusion is an idealised interpretation of how people might see the world … or the way we might want the world to be … then, **what is delusion?**

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[1] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *'Thoughts out of season, Part 2, The use and abuse of History. Preface'. Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie fur das Leben. 1874.*

Delusion is when our understanding is based on an illusion being absolutely true. It can affect our mental stability … to make sense … to be able to cope with life in a society of behavioural rules and expectations.

Are we 'buying into' an imagined reality (an implied promise) **without checking** to see if it is a true representation?
That is a leap of faith, a trust in a story … that we might want to make sense for us. But **delusion**, even at the casual level, **is an avoidance** of the harshness of reality… and it lessens the ability to belong in mainstream society.
Does it matter … this chasing dreams? As long as you feel happy, searching for your own fulfillment, why does it matter?
Or is it searching for an addictive 'high'?
Some find that experience can be induced by drugs. Others just feel free to be different … to disagree … to dissent … to have an opinion that is distinct from the prevailing thinking.

The world of the influencers is not new in human history.
More than two thousand years ago, the Greek poet, **Homer**, wrote about the hypnotic call of the **entrancing Sirens** … drawing sailors towards an imagined promise … only for their ships to crash onto the rocks of reality.[2]

Influencers try to persuade others … sometimes for selfish motivations. They offer something better … as a dream … life changing experiences … to belong to success … being valued for your difference.
Come and have fun!
Is the need for excitement part of human nature? To the extent that it becomes almost a compulsive pull for more?
What is this need for constant stimulation … for entertainment, for new experiences?
For some, it comes through sports or the Arts or travel. For others, it is in the challenging distractions of intellectual play … parlour games on computers or boards, with cards or movable pieces … or mastering quizzes. Some choose to lose themselves in reading books or watching movies … keeping their dreams alive. **Any of those distractions can certainly help**

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[2] Homer. *The Odyssey, Book 12, lines 39-200. 8th century BCE*

us to be happy … far away from the more challenging pressures around the daily rigours of life.

We use illusions all the time… that unreal world of imagining or appreciating the skill of entertainers … to protect us from realities that we aren't ready to face. They help us feel safe and hopeful. An uncomfortable side of human nature is that **truth is not always easy to accept**.

The challenge is then to be able to **distinguish the harmless pastime of distracting illusions** from the **darker progression towards accepting falsehoods as if they are truth.**

That is the more painful world of **delusion** – a strong belief that is held firmly, even when shown undeniable proof that it is false. It may exhibit as a form of paranoia or narcissism … or of self-righteousness that is not generally shared by the wider society within which the person lives.

Why are humans lured by illusions – of the benign beguiling types?

Accepting illusion is part of a learning process – from early childhood observations of the trusted people around … from fairy stories to family games. It can be part of the brain maturing from simple concrete thinking through the narratives of allegories, analogies and metaphors – onward towards a more sophisticated abstract theorising of mathematics and philosophy. The Arts are very skilled in teaching valuable social lessons in a palatable manner.

The challenge comes if participants are unable to separate harmless distracting fun in a learning process from the dangers of … **the more manipulative mind-controlling isolating unreality** in … cults, confidence tricksters and scammers.

Somewhere beyond everyone's happy illusions (those within the parameters of socially acceptable dreams) are the notions of morality, decency and courteous behaviour within civilised society.

Not all societies share a single 'right' view of social behaviour or belief.

There is a multitude of 'beliefs' (irrespective of their 'rightness' in testable facts), political structures and views of morality. Yet, we all must live together on the same planet without universal agreement on human rights.[3]

[3] 192 out of 214 countries have voted for the UN Declaration of Human Rights

In 1694, English poet, John Donne,[4] wrote: '*No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.*'
So, should we all just fight for the superiority of our ideals and call any victory a vindication of 'rightness'? General Douglas Macarthur implied such in a statement in 1945 in Tokyo Bay after World War 2.[5]
Is 'rightness' to be determined by the power of armies or by rules imposed by national leaders? The views of *'morality police'* in some countries contrast starkly with the policies of other countries.
Or is there a logical argument process to determine the factual basis of understandings? Can some strongly held views be shown to be merely illusions?

Therein lies the difficulty. Acceptance of 'rightness' varies according to the context of upbringings and the organising structures of nations. **It is the absolutism of 'rightness' that causes much of the discord across the planet.** Yet, we must try to co-exist – with tolerance and adjustments.

That is fine for those insulated by their power, but less fine for those in the many forms of slavery (chattel, indentured, economic, servitude …) and displacement from their lands of belonging and worth. There is not much fun or freedom for those born into the less advantaged roles of social life.

So, **the lure of illusion can condition lives of individuals, peoples, countries – even the planet. Truth is somewhere**, filtered through the lens of influence, power, expediency and righteousness.

Let's keep the illusions, the magic tricks, the dreams … at the level of entertainment and protect from the delusions of absolutism or power.
The world faces huge difficult truths that are being avoided. The idiom *'the elephant in the room'* captures that sense. But it is easier to deny and distract with illusions … a self-interested *'kicking the can down the road'* for others to deal with later … until survival will deny any choice.

Can we handle the truth?

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[4] John Donne (1572-1631) *Meditation XVII 1624.*
[5] *'We are gathered here, representatives of the major warring powers – to conclude a solemn agreement whereby peace may be restored. The issues involving divergent ideals and ideologies have been determined on the battlefields of the world.'*