GASLITCATFISH

They're Called Dreams Because You Must Be Asleep to Have Them

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by Wayne McRae

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gaslitcatfish.com

CHAPTERS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wayne McRae is a writer and analyst based in South Africa with a background in tech, coding, and digital strategy. Over the years he has built a reputation for cutting through jargon and surfacing what truly matters in systems, whether in business, media, or culture. His work blends technical literacy with a sharp critical lens, positioning him at the edge of both the digital economy and its social consequences.

Drawing on experience in content creation, marketing, and problem-solving, Wayne has developed a style that is both accessible and incisive. He brings clarity to messy subjects, from search engines and online communities to questions of trust, gullibility, and the narratives that shape public life. With a keen eye for detail and a willingness to interrogate the obvious, he connects dots in ways that challenge assumptions and open new perspectives.

As *gaslitcatfish*, Wayne explores the fractures and illusions woven through modern technology and culture. His writing examines where hype, deception, and power collide, often exposing the contradictions most prefer to ignore. He not only critiques but also reframes how we understand the tools and stories shaping our lives.

CHAPTER I

THE CURTAIN RISES – WHY THIS STORY MATTERS NOW

The feed scrolls endlessly. A politician contradicts himself without missing a beat, his denial neatly clipped and subtitled for viral impact. An influencer sobs convincingly into a camera, their mascara running at the perfect angle to elicit sympathy and garner the highest number of shares.

A video circulates of a celebrity confessing a secret, except it isn't them, it's a deepfake stitched from training data. Even your neighbour's smile seems suspect: is it warm, or is it rehearsed? Genuine? Algorithmic? Do you really know anyone anymore?

The whole world feels like a stage, and most of us are trapped clapping like seals in the audience, twisted whiskers twitching. Some of us even think to grunt out the same question: *"Is any of this real?"*

The question isn't new. We've always lived inside layers of performance and deception, myth and dream. What makes this different now, and why the moment feels like a crisis, is the scale, the speed, and the saturation. Fakery is no longer a background hum; it's the operating system.

Welcome to the century of the gaslitcatfish.

The Age of Illusions

Gaslighting is a psychological abuse tactic: denying someone's reality until they doubt their own senses. Catfishing is a digital scam: inventing a false persona and convincing someone to believe it. Put them together and you get the creature of our time, set in a society where reality is not just denied, but reconstructed wholesale, complete with polished avatars and slick algorithmic scripts.

To be a gaslitcatfish is to be caught in a loop of doubt and desire. You suspect

the story isn't true, but you desperately want it to be. You know the picture is staged, but the idea behind it still sparks envy. You understand the headline is clickbait, but that doesn't stop you from clicking on it anyway. Every swipe, every scroll, every share is a gamble on the reality wheel. And, as expected, the house always wins. A gaslitcatfish is not only being fooled, but also actively fooling everyone else. The input isn't true, the output isn't true. By design.

For most of history, illusions spread slowly: myths whispered beside campfires, spirals painted on cave walls, gods carved in temples. Today, they travel at light speed, multiplied and memed by millions. We don't simply consume illusions anymore; we live inside them. Reality is now a feed, curated by invisible algorithms crafted not to inform, but to provoke. The question of what's real no longer feels philosophical. It feels existential.

Why This Story Matters

If this book has a central argument, it's this: all this fakery is nothing new, but it has become impossible to ignore.

Illusion once occupied a sacred space within our minds. It allowed us to plan imagined possibilities, tell stories, and think of futures before they happened. But the useful tools have been weaponized against us. Dreams are engineered not for our survival, but for someone else's gain. What was once ritual and myth has morphed into marketing, manipulation, and mass delusion.

Why does this matter? Because when reality itself becomes unstable, totalitarianism inevitably thrives in the cracks. When we no longer trust what we see, we surrender to those who can shout the loudest, entertain us best, or confuse us long enough to stop taking note of what's real. The brokers of this power feel nothing for the average human. This is not just a crisis of truth. It's a crisis of perception. And without stable perception, freedom itself becomes fragile.

The First Trick

Let's be clear: the fakery is not a glitch in the system; *it is the system.* Long before made-up face filters, there were shamans conjuring spirits from smoke. Long before deepfakes, there were kings and jesters declaring eclipses were proof of divine favour.

Illusion or delusion has always been a

tool of survival and control. But something has definitely shifted. The performance is no longer optional background noise - it's now the whole environment. From the ads on our bus rides to the carefully curated personas of our coworkers to the algorithmically optimized dating profile we swipe on at two in the morning, we're surrounded by manufactured realities. You don't step into fakery anymore. You wake up inside it,

A Survival Manual

That's not to laugh at dreams. Stories, myths, and imagination are the lifeblood and engines of all human creativity. Without them, we wouldn't have art, science, culture, possibly even language or society. We certainly wouldn't have so many words to describe them. The problem is what happens when those gifts are twisted into systems of manipulation, when imagination becomes simulation, and simulation is co-opted for coercion.

The gaslitcatfish is the mascot of this world: a hybrid trickster, equal parts intimate abuser and victim, internet scammer and mark. A clueless online troll, whispering in your ear while presenting you with a dull hologram of

itself. To survive this, we don't just need media literacy; we need reality reinforcement. We need to think critically and see the world as it is, rather than the way we wish it to be.

That means learning to recognize the illusions, tracing them back through our history, and understanding the mechanics of how they work. It means cultivating skepticism without drowning in cynicism. And it means reclaiming imagination, not as a knife turned against us, but as a hammer for building futures we might actually want to live in.

Today's Illusions

Let's take a quick tour of the illusions currently defining our age:

- AI hallucinations. Texts, images, voices generated out of thin air, blending fiction with fact seamlessly.
- Engineered narratives. Our governments and corporations are crafting stories so consistent and overwhelming that resistance starts to feel like madness.
- Institutional distrust. Faith in media, science, politics, and community is at historic lows. This is not by accident. Doubt itself has

- been commodified on an industrial scale.
- The exhaustion economy. When every day's news cycle is a flood of contradictions and confusion, the result is paralysis, and a population whose primary response to the danger is the pursuit of dopamine hits.

This isn't conspiracy thinking, it's structural reality. Fakery is baked into the platforms we use, the advertisements we see, and the politics we're forced to navigate. The gaslitcatfish isn't hiding in the anemones. It's swimming in the feed and smiling with its perfect teeth.

The Stakes of the Moment

George Carlin once joked, *"It's called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it."* The line is funny because it's true. It cuts to something painfully real. To stay inside today's illusory world is to stay asleep. To wake up is uncomfortable, even terrifying.

We're facing a cultural emergency. The collapse of shared reality isn't just an intellectual exercise; it is the background condition for everything from the strength of democracies to

climate change to the depth of human connection. If we can't agree on what's real, how do we act together? If every fact is up for grabs, how do we make collective decisions? If every image is suspect, how do we trust our memories?

The curtain is rising on a new stage of human history, and what's behind it is not just smoke and mirrors - it's smoke and mirrors running on machine learning. Optimized for engagement, and weaponized by the powers that be to an extent not seen before.

Looking Back to See Ahead

To understand this present moment, we have to zoom out. The gaslitcatfish isn't a sudden mutation. It's an evolutionary step in a long human saga. Fakery has always existed, from cave art to cathedrals, from totem poles to Madison Avenue ads. Each new medium created new illusions. And each illusion remodelled what we thought reality was.

The point here isn't nostalgia. There never was a golden age of pure truth, no matter what the rose-tinted glasses say. The point is pattern recognition. Once we see how fakery functioned in the past, we can better understand the

shape it takes today, and recognise it for what it is.

The journey ahead will move across eras and technologies, myths and machines. We'll walk through medieval cathedrals glowing with stained glass, read about pamphlets sparking panic during the Enlightenment, hear about radio speeches designed to hypnotize masses and television shows aping family life. Eventually, we'll get to the hall of mirrors we live in now.

Each chapter will uncover a different mask of fakery, not to dismiss imagination, but to expose how it was twisted into a delivery system for manipulation. Imagination isn't the poison. It's the needle that injects the poison. We have to understand this monster fully if we're ever going to kick this habit.

Thesis Restated

This is a survival manual for the age of illusion. We can't kill illusion, and nor should we want to. Imagination is one of the things that makes us human. and it relies on making things up to a large degree. Not all illusions are bad. But we can learn to separate imagination as a survival tool from fakery as a weapon. We can learn to spot the gaslitcatfish

in its many guises, especially if we see it staring back at us when we look in the mirror. None of us is immune to the poison.

The aim is to clear the fakery from our veins, so we can keep dreaming, but still be wide awake.

Case Study: The Deepfake Smile

A video goes viral of a world leader declaring peace. The cadence is perfect, the lips match the sound, the lighting is authentic, and the hairpiece ripples just so. For an hour or two, the world exhales. Then comes the sad correction: it wasn't real. It was a deepfake. The peace never existed. The hope was synthetic.

This is the new frontier of illusion: not merely the creation of images, sounds, and video, but the engineering of emotions. Deepfakes are addictive eye candy and, as happens with too much candy, they hijack our nervous systems.

Deepfakes tap into our longing for news we want to hear. They tap into our fear of betrayal, our innate need for heroes and villains, and easy puzzles, simple solutions. The fakery doesn't stop when we know it's fake. The emotional residue lingers, shaping our

thought-bubbles long after the debunking.

The gaslitcatfish thrives here: in the gap between knowing and feeling. You know the smile wasn't real, but you felt the warmth anyway. Fooling yourself is intrinsically enigmatic. If it works, you'll never know what hit you. Belief becomes a permanent condition, a handy tool to sculpt your perceptions. If everything can be faked, how do you trust anything? If you can't trust anything, well then: any story is as good as the next.

Case Study: The Influencer's Tears

The ring light is perfectly positioned. The caption reads, *"This is hard for me to share, but I owe it to my followers."* They cry visibly, beautifully, soft-filtered and intricate. Within minutes, the comments fill with encouragement, well-wishers, solidarity, confessions from strangers who feel *"so seen."*

Is it fake? Not exactly. The tears are real enough. The pain could even be real. But the framing - the timing, the monetization, the transformation of vulnerability into content - is calculated down to the nanosecond. This is authenticity as performance,

and intimacy as brand strategy.

It isn't just influencers. Politicians now livestream their beefs. CEOs post about their struggles trying to humanize corporate layoffs. Even ordinary slobs like us catch ourselves scripting our emotions for social media at times. What began as interaction has become *Live On Broadway.*

We're not just watching illusions. We're participating in them, optimizing our own personalities for visibility and engagement. The line between the real self and the performed self is thinner than ever. And the more we perform, the harder it is to remember what it felt like to live unobserved.

Case Study: The Political Stage

In 2020, a dictator held a press conference at a table longer than a bowling lane. The absurdity wasn't an accident; it was part of the show. Power has always relied heavily on spectacle, but in an age of rapidly collapsing trust, the spectacle becomes the message.

Politics today is less about governing than it's about staging - red hats and

rallies, slogans engineered for hashtags, photo ops with babies, stage-managed disaster scenes. The content of policies matters far less than the performance of strength, empathy, pathos, or outrage. Even scandals become fuel. To deny, deflect, or double down is to control the narrative cycle for another 48 hours. The truth becomes whatever those telling the stories have decided it will be.

The political gaslitcatfish doesn't just lie. It creates its own world where lies are indistinguishable from truths, where the sheer flood of contradictions wears us down until we stop demanding coherence because we've long forgotten how it would look. Fakery is the mask over the reality we're forced to live with.

Saturation Point

What unites these examples isn't their novelty, but their totality. Illusion is no longer a special effect; it's the air we breathe.

Think about your daily scroll. How many images do you see in a day that are untouched by filters, edits, or optimizations? How many headlines cross your screen that aren't designed to provoke a reaction and produce a click? How many interactions happen outside the gaze of a rapt audience?

Fakery is no longer rare - it's the baseline. The question is not *"Is this fake?"* but *"What kind of fake is this?"*

The other question is, *"Who benefits ?"*

This is the saturation point: when the volume of illusions overwhelms our ability to separate them from reality. The gaslitcatfish doesn't need you to believe every lie. It just needs you to doubt in large enough doses as often as possible. Until sheer exhaustion forces you to give up on truth altogether.

The Collapse of "Seeing Is Believing"

For centuries, the phrase was, in practical terms, short for "proof." If you saw it with your own eyes, it was real. That no longer holds.

- You can see a photo of a protest that never happened.
- You can see a message from a friend that they never sent.
- You can see your own face in a crowd you've never been in.

When your senses become unreliable, reality slips. What we face is not just disinformation, but a deeper epistemic crisis. A collapse in the basic structures of trust. We're not just doubting the media or the politicians - we're doubting our own perceptions, our neighbours, even ourselves.

This collapse is no accident. It's profitable. It's politically useful. And it's spreading faster than our ability to adapt.

The Exhaustion Economy

Here's the upshot. The goal of fakery isn't always mere persuasion. Often, it's exhaustion.

To quote chess master Garry Kasparov, *"The point of modern propaganda isn't only to misinform or push an agenda. It is to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth."*

When your feed is a constant churn of contradictory headlines, of AI images and manufactured outrage, the most common reaction is not belief, but fatigue.

"It's exhausting trying to figure out what's real all the time, Not to mention it's battering my mental health. What with the daily grind and all. So if I can manage to just stop caring, it'll probably actually be better for everyone all round. Can't I just not think about it and enjoy my life like everyone else?"

This is the exhaustion economy: a state where disbelief becomes apathy, and apathy turns into blind compliance. The gaslitcatfish thrives here, too. When you're too tired to fight for truth, you surrender to whatever is easiest, most entertaining, or most familiar.

In this sense, the real enemy isn't "fake news," it's hopelessness. Fakery doesn't just deceive; it demoralizes. And demoralized people are easier to rule.

A Mirror, Not a Mirage

At this point, you might be tempted to imagine fakery as an alien intrusion, some new disease infecting our digital bodies. But the uncomfortable truth, a bit of a bummer, really, is that fakery's not just around us, it is us.

The influencer's stage-managed tears mirror our own curated posts. The politician's performance mirrors our own desire to be seen. The deepfake's

plausibility relies on the same storytelling instincts we use when we exaggerate about a lunch date or a fight at work to friends.

The gaslitcatfish isn't just a predator; it's reflecting something very real.. The illusions shaping our world are built on the same imaginative powers that gave us art, myth, and culture in the first place. To fight them, we need to understand them not as tricks or traps, but as human ploughshares that have been beaten into swords and turned against us. By people who aren't all that different from us. Sometimes, by ourselves.

A Glimpse Backward

This is why history matters. None of this emerged out of nowhere. As improbable as it seems, we're living in *The Matrix.* Every new medium - cave art, stained glass, pamphlets, radio, television, the internet - created fresh opportunities for fakery. Each reshaped the boundary between the real and the illusory, and then sent us off to the comic convention in anime cosplay.

The choice is similar. Red for reality, Blue for the fakery. Throw in the magnetic attraction of the black pill of naked nihilism or self-destruction, and it's no surprise most people willingly choose the blue one.

The medieval peasant standing under the glow of stained glass wasn't that different from the modern teenager staring into a glowing smartphone. Both were absorbing a vision of reality designed by others. Both were experiencing wonder, confusion, and awe. And both were being nudged, subtly or forcefully, toward unsubstantiated belief.

To understand where we are, we need to walk this path backwards. We need to see how imagination became performance, performance became power, power became manipulation. Fasten your seatbelt.

Setting the Stage

So this is where our story begins. With the recognition that reality feels unstable because it *is* unstable. Not because humans suddenly became more impressionable, but because the tools for shaping perception aren't under their control.

CHAPTER I

The curtain has risen on a world where fakery is not the exception, but the rule. We won't dismiss dreams or kill imagination. We're here to learn how to navigate the illusions without having them dictate our reality.

We'll trace the long history of fakery, from way back then to right about now. Past shamans and algorithms. From myths whispered by firelight to memes flashed across screens. And we'll see how illusion was always double-edged: tool and weapon, liberator and control mechanism.

Preview of the Journey

Before we move on, here's a map to show us where we're going.

We'll start with the prehistoric imagination. Sometime around when illusions let us into a theory of other minds, and homo Sapiens started decorating themselves and the walls, among other things.

We'll move into religion and monarchy, where those who controlled the illusions learned it helped them wield authority.

We'll watch print and propaganda weaponize words and images to a staggering degree.

Then, we'll see how advertising and television industrialized fakery, promising that blind faith in the system was sure to work out at some point.

We'll arrive in the present (or thereabouts), where algorithms and AI create illusions on an infinite scale, warping reality until it disappears.

Chapter I has only set the stage. The story really begins when we step back into prehistory, where imagination's fires sparked the first flickers of illusion. Not surprisingly, those fires started around other fires. With people telling tales to keep the night at bay. To understand the gaslitcatfish, we must first go back and try to understand what made our very early ancestors tick.

Imagination as Survival

Before we condemn fakery outright, we need to acknowledge its dual nature. Illusion is not always sinister. At the very beginning of human history, imagination was a vital tool for survival.

Picture a hunter crouched in dim torchlight, drawing a bison on a cave wall. The beast in the stone wasn't a deception; it was a projection. A mind-movie. We all have them. Whether it foreshadowed a hunt to model the future, or told of one that had already happened, we don't know. But we do know that the very act spoke of a mind that wanted to represent its thoughts symbolically. It also wanted others to see what it was thinking.

This is the paradox: the very same ability that lets us conjure survival scenarios is also the ability that lets us spread lies. To imagine is to simulate. To simulate is to create possibilities that don't exist. And once you can create possibilities, you can choose to share them honestly or not.

The gaslitcatfish swims in this paradox. It thrives on the human gift of imagination, twisting it from a survival tool into a control mechanism.

When Illusion Turns

The turning point comes when imagination ceases to be communal and becomes centralized. When the powers starts looking after it's own interests, rather than those of the tribe.

Cave paintings were shared experiences, and myth-making was collective storytelling. We don't understand the meaning of cave paintings, and they have the feel of an in-joke - you had to be there, as they say these days, to truly appreciate them. But as soon as certain people controlled the myths, they weaponized performing for a crowd, and the balance shifted.

Illusion became a path to hierarchy. Priests cloaked astronomy in prophecy and created astrology in the process. Kings wrapped authority in impressive pageantry. Colonizers justified violence with mythologies preaching about destiny. Fakery became infrastructure, not just improvisation.

We often like to believe that we're rational moderns, immune to such tricks. But the truth is that our feeds are filled with the same mechanisms, now digitized. The influencer is a shaman, the politician is a priest, the corporation is a king. They sell us not just goods or policies, but realities. And like our ancestors, we often buy in, not because we're stupid, but because the illusions are woven into the fabric of

our survival as a social species.

Living With Fakery

How does it feel to live in a world where fakery is the rule? The symptoms are everywhere:

- Anxiety. When you can't trust what you see. You live in constant suspicion.
- Isolation. When trust collapses, connection collapses with it.
- Exhaustion. When every claim needs fact-checking, fatigue and apathy replace curiosity.
- Cynicism. When you've been fooled too many times, it's sometimes easier to stop caring altogether.

These feelings aren't private; they're systemic. They're the emotional infrastructure of the gaslitcatfish age. And the danger isn't just that we'll believe the lies, but that we'll lose the will to distinguish between truth and falsehood forever. That's the ultimate victory of fakery: not persuasion, but resignation. Not belief in the end, but surrender.

The Role of Power

We must also be blunt: fakery is not distributed evenly. Anyone can play with a mask, but not everyone can project the illusions at scale.

- A teenager editing selfies isn't the same as a corporation engineering an ad campaign.
- A conspiracy forum is not the same as a state flooding information channels with disinformation.
- A single scammer catfishing online is not the same as a platform monetizing parasocial relationships by the billions.

All gaslitcatfish are not created equal. Fakery becomes dangerous when it aligns with power. When it forgets about the tribe. The tribe is everything. It's you, your loved ones, and your environment.

Dreams vs. Fakery

But there's a deeper risk here: in our rush to unmask illusions, we might end up discarding imagination itself.

illusions would not be a utopia; it would be sterile. We don't want to abolish imagination. We want to reclaim it.

This is not a case of sneering at our

fantasies. It's about distinguishing between imagination that sustains life and fakery that steals from it. Between the dream that guides us and the nightmare that manipulates us. *"Art that inspires, or lies that control?"*

The task is delicate: to cultivate suspicion without suffocating wonder. To stay awake without abandoning the possibility of dreaming.

Waking Up

You could assume that waking up in the gaslitcatfish age is easy. Just unplug everything. *"Get offline, go outside, and touch grass, man."* But unfortunately, you can't. The illusions are baked into the cake of daily life. Pretending they don't exist won't solve anything

Waking up means seeing the seams. It means noticing when the story shifts, when the performance breaks, when the algorithm nudges you. It means resisting the exhaustion economy by caring anyway, even when caring feels like a waste of effort.

distributed evenly. Everyone plays with masks, but not everyone has the means to project the illusions at scale.

Civilized societies should address imbalances like these.

A teenager editing selfies isn't the same as a corporation engineering an ad campaign.
A lone Nigerian prince catfishing online isn't the same as a platform monetizing parasocial relationships by the billions.
A conspiracy forum isn't the same as a state flooding information channels with disinformation.

All gaslitcatfish are not created equal. Fakery becomes dangerous when it aligns with power.

When illusions reinforce inequality, confusion is not just collateral damage; it's the plan. The deliberate gaslitcatfish isn't just a predator in the stream; it's cultivated, farmed, and monetized by those who profit from instability.

Dreams and Fakery

So the curtain has now risen, and the stage is set. The actors are already performing. Illusions and delusions are shimmering in the feed.

We can't stop the play, but we can

choose how we watch it, how we interpret it, and whether its narrative dictates our lives.

Because if we don't learn to navigate the stories shaping our world, we'll drown in them. But if we can find a way, then maybe, just maybe, we can dream without being deceived.

And that's worth being awake for.

Gaslitcatfish: They're Called Dreams Because You Must Be Asleep to Have Them

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CHAPTER II

SMOKE, MIRRORS, AND MEMES – IMAGINATION IN CAVES AND RITUALS

The First Gaslitcatfish

The first gaslitcatfish wasn't a king with a crown, a priest with a relic, or a politician with a spin doctor. It was a hunter bathed in torchlight, dragging charcoal across stone to etch the outline of a bison. *"This,"* he might have said to the echoing dark, *"is what tomorrow looks like."*

Or maybe it wasn't the hunter but one of the tribe gathered afterward, staring at the flickering animal sketched on the cave wall. The flames danced, the drawing seemed to move, and for a moment, it could feel the chase as it happened. The hunt and the kill were reimagined, and imagination made it feel as real as being there.

That moment, that flicker between the real and the imagined, is where illusion begins. Not as deception, but as survival, as social cohesion, as the communication of treasured thoughts.

The Firelight Stage

Caves were the first theatres. Firelight was the first projector. Shadows.the special effects that thrilled the enraptured audience.

Our ancestors weren't only decorating walls when they painted them. They were either rehearsing futures, recording pasts, or explaining reality. To draw an animal was to immortalise its life. To tell a story of the spirits was to make sense of death. Chanting, drumming, and other machinations while dancing in the dark created a collective trance. A shared simulation of worlds that didn't exist, but felt real nonetheless.

Imagination allowed us to extend beyond the immediate. We could model outcomes before they occurred and test possibilities in our minds before testing them out in the world. Illusion, in this sense, was our first technology.

But from the start, it had a dual edge. The same capacity to model in the mind could also be used to manipulate belief. If an elder claimed the shadows were spirits, or that the animal on the wall held supernatural power, who could argue? The leap from imagination to authority was small, and once taken, it would reshape all of human history.

The Stoned Ape Hypothesis

Some anthropologists argue that altered states of consciousness played a role in sparking imagination. This hypothesis suggests that early humans' consumption of psychoactive plants might have triggered new ways of thinking. Whether or not the theory holds scientifically, the point is compelling: imagination often inhabits the very edges of perception.

Mushrooms, fermented drinks, trance dances - these were not distractions. They were tools to break open the ordinary, to allow the visions to pour in, to force minds to think in ways they usually wouldn't. And once a vision was experienced, it was only human to want to share it with others. Stories were birthed. Rituals were codified.

The tribe could step outside the given and the mundane, and into the possible and the fantastical.

This wasn't fakery in the cynical sense. It was a collective rehearsal. To imagine spirits was to feel you had allies in a harsh and uncompromising environment. To dream a future was to prepare for it. But already the seeds of power struggle were being planted. Who got to interpret the visions? Who decided which dream was sacred and which was madness?

Ritual as Reality

Ritual is where imagination tips into performance. The shaman doesn't just tell you about the spirit world - they enact it. They paint their faces, wear masks, and chant nonsensically. Or in tongues, as they might put it. The line between story and fact blurs, not only for the audience but also for the performer.

The brilliance of ritual is that it collapses the distinction between the actual and the fictional. When a community gathers around a fire in ecstatic fellowship, the shared experience is real, even if the spirits

aren't. The emotions, the cohesion, the sense of connection. These are not illusions. They are the outcomes that issue from the illusions.

This is the trick that will echo through every age of fakery. Illusions need not be believed to be effective. They need to be felt. The stained window in a cathedral, the enticement on a billboard, the meme from your feed. They work not because you think they're true, but because you feel something when you look at them.

The First Memes

Richard Dawkins coined the word "meme" in the 1970s to describe cultural units of replication, but memes existed long before that. A meme is just an idea that spreads because it gets stuck in the mind. It solidifies there, like a mosquito caught in amber.

The earliest memes were myths and stories. A tale of a trickster god, a warning about a spirit in the woods, a rhyme of ancient ancestors watching from the sky. These memes spread because they resonated emotionally, and they usually communicated important survival lessons. They also

helped foster a sense of belonging.

Once an idea becomes sticky, it can be used for purposes beyond survival. A story can preserve a memory, or it can enforce obedience. A chant can unify a community in hope or unite it in fear. The first memes were seeds, and what they grew into depended on who was watering them.

Imagination vs. Fakery

At this point, it's important to separate the two threads. Imagination is the ability to picture what isn't real. Fakery is the exploitation of that ability to manipulate others. The former is fun, frivolous, and fortunate, whereas the latter is an engineered power play.

But the boundary between them is slippery. A hunter chalking a rock face is using his imagination. A shaman declaring that the image guarantees tomorrow's hunt is successful engages in fakery. The difference lies in the intention. Iis the illusion serving the tribe, or is it serving the storyteller?

This distinction matters because it sets the tone for the rest of history. From this moment on, illusion will always

carry the potential to tip from tool to trap. And once it does, it becomes the progenitor of an unequal class system.

The Social Glue of Stories

Why did illusions spread so easily? Because they worked. People just can/t resist a good story. Stories create unity. A tribe where everyone believes the same myth is a tribe that trusts each other. A ritual shared is a relationship reinforced. Illusion provided social stickiness in a world where survival was reliant on cooperation.

But cohesion comes at a cost. To bring a story to life is to obey it. The same myth that consolidates the tribe can also silence dissent, just as the same ritual that creates solidarity can also reinforce hierarchy.

Illusion bonds, but it also binds.

This dual function is why fakery has always been attractive to those in power. To control the story is to control the population, and defining the ritual controls the surroundings. From this shift onward, the stage and the throne were never far apart.

Shadows on the Wall

The allegory of Plato's cave is often cited as a metaphor for illusion. It describes prisoners watching shadows cast on a wall and treating them as reality. Some people think the allegory is a warning. In the context of the gaslitcatfish, however, it seems it can more accurately be seen as a description of how humans have always perceived their surroundings.

We're shadow-watchers by nature, and we've long lived within a compiled reality. Today's memes and digital illusions aren't fundamentally different from cave paintings and rituals. They recycle the same tricks: repetition, spectacle, performance, story, symbol. What has changed is the scale. Billions of shadows, projected in real time, flood every wall we can see.

Thesis of the Chapter

Imagination was our first survival technology. It allowed us to model the world around us, prepare for contingencies, and share our ideas of what might come next. Fakery came later, when those same tools were twisted into instruments of power.

What began as survival art became propaganda. Ritual became ideology, Collective dreamweaving became manipulation.

If Chapter I set the stage by showing why fakery matters now, Chapter II turns up the lights by showing that it's always been with us. Illusion isn't an invention of the internet; it's an ancient human inheritance. To understand the gaslitcatfish, we must begin here: in the caves, in the smoke, in the rituals where imagination first blurred itself into power. Look for the ripples in the dark and brackish pools of water.

When Ritual Becomes Authority

Ritual begins as a shared performance. The group gathers, the fire crackles, the chants rise. In these moments, everyone is both actor and audience. But slowly, inevitably, roles emerge. Someone leads the chant. Someone interprets the vision. Someone claims the mask as their own.

And with that claim, a hierarchy forms. The shaman doesn't just guide; they arbitrate. The ritual becomes less about communal meaning and more about the authority of the performer. If the spirits spoke through them once, why not always? If the mask gave them power inside a trance, why shouldn't it grant power outside it, too?

These leaders weren't simply the strongest hunters, although they may have been. but they were the most convincing illusionists. Those who could harness imagination became the custodians of everyone else's reality.

Masks as Technology

Consider those masks. Strips of wood, painted and adorned, strapped across the face. Simple, but transformative. Behind a mask, a person becomes whatever they claim to be: a spirit, an ancestor, a force of nature that manifests beyond their human form.

Masks were more than mere decoration. They were early reality-distortion devices. To wear a mask was to embody an idea bigger than yourself. And once others associated you with that powerful idea, the transformation was complete. The performance became the new actuality.

A mask is one of the oldest forms of augmented reality. Long before VR headsets, a painted face transported the community into another world. And, crucially, whoever held the mask held the power to explain that world.

Story as Binding Spell

If masks embodied illusion, stories carried it forward. Oral tradition was not just entertainment; it was canon, instruction, law, health, history, and cosmology rolled into one. A people's story told them who they were, where they came from, what they must do, and what would happen to them if they disobeyed.

These stories stuck. They spread from camp to camp and generation to generation, memes long before the word existed. But as with rituals, stories were double-edged. They could bond communities together with shared meaning, or they could bind those same communities into blind compliance.

A tale about a trickster god would entertain, but with a warning. A tale about a punishing spirit could enforce conformity and still be a laugh. And once elders or leaders claimed the right to interpret the stories, the myths transmuted into dogma. Fakery was accelerated not in the invention of stories, but in the monopolization of them.

The Performance of Belief

This is the paradox. Belief doesn't have to be literal to work. The community knows that the mask is wood and paint. They might suspect the shaman's visions are dreams. When the ritual is powerful enough, the question of literal truth becomes largely irrelevant. The feelings are real. The sense of connection is real. The cohesion it engenders is real. Fakery doesn't need to convince the rational mind. It only needs to appeal to the emotional experience.

So illusions that feel deep often matter more than truths that fall flat. That dynamic, established at the dawn of mankind's day, still drives the success of advertising, propaganda, and digital memes in the modern world.

Tricksters and Power

Many early culture myths included a trickster figure: Coyote, Anansi, Loki, Hermes. The trickster lies, cheats, and disrupts. They break rules. They create chaos. And yet, they're often central to the culture's stories.

Why? Because the trickster exemplifies the duality of human personality, and the fickle nature of an uncaring universe that is, nevertheless, nice enough not to exterminate us. Tricksters show that rules are arbitrary, that appearances deceive, that autonomy is fragile, and chance rules with an iron fist. In celebrating tricksters, cultures acknowledged the very fakery that shaped them.

They're dangerous and mad. They could manipulate tales to inspire awe or fear. And it wasn't long before some real-world figures began to model themselves on them, using deception as a tool of leadership. The shaman could heal or con. The king could protect or exploit. The line was thin, and it moved at any time.

The Birth of Spectacle

At some point, ritual crossed another threshold and became spectacle. Instead of shared participation, the group became an audience watching a chosen few perform. The boundary between performer and spectator widened. Illusion became less about collective experience and more about staged authority.

This shift marked a profound change. When everyone participates, the illusion is transparent. You know how the chant works when you're part of it. But when you're in the audience, the illusion takes on a different weight. The performance feels remote, untouchable, controlled by others. It becomes easier to believe that the performers possess something you don't.

The seeds of theatre, politics, and religion are all here: spectacle as a tool of power. And once spectacle is established, fakery gains more force. The audience doesn't just consume the illusion; they're recipients of it.

Proto-Propaganda

Imagine an elder telling the story of a great flood, warning the tribe that disobedience angered the spirits. The story carries survival lessons. Respect nature. Avoid arrogance. But it also reinforces authority: follow the elder's directives or you risk destruction.

This is proto-propaganda. The blending of truth and manipulation. The packaging of survival information with demands of obedience to a self-proclaimed superior caste. The myth is syrupy. It sticks in the mind not just because it resonates, but because it benefits the teller who is constantly reiterating it.

Over time, these stories become less about survival and more about control. The spirits punish not only arrogance, but also disloyalty to the leader. The myths evolve to serve the status quo. Fakery hardens into ideology.

Smoke and Mirrors

The phrase "smoke and mirrors" evokes today's stage magicians, but its origins are ancient. Firelight alone could transform a space. Add smoke, and the air itself became alive with forms and shadows, whisps and tendrils. Early ritualists understood this intuitively: smoke distorts, mirrors reflect, and light transforms.

This wasn't entertainment, but it was a show. A ritual with smoke and shadows felt charged, uncanny, divine. The rote manipulation of sensory experience created blind belief, a state upheld not by argument but through reverence.

More importantly, it worked. Fakery works best when it bypasses reason and overwhelms perception. In a cave, or on a digital feed, illusions succeed by flooding the senses faster than skepticism can respond.

From Cave to Cathedral

What began in caves didn't disappear; it evolved. The fireside stage became the temple. The painted bison became the stained glass. The shaman's trance dance became the priest's fiery sermon. Each step preserved the same basic formula - manipulate perception to shape belief.

The difference was scale. A cave ritual might affect a tribe. A cathedral could

awe thousands. A broadcast could reach millions. A meme could be seen by billions.

This continuity matters because it shows that today's illusions aren't unprecedented. Rather, they're accelerations: the very same smoke, mirrors, and masks, now amplified by technology. The gaslitcatfish goes along happily with this ancient flow.

Transition to Chapter III

As we leave the caves and rituals behind, we step into the world of organized authority. The mask becomes a crown. The shaman becomes a priest. The ritual becomes the law.

If Chapter II is about the birth of illusion for survival and cohesion, Chapter III will show how those same illusions were harnessed to consolidate power. The stage grows larger, the costumes become more elaborate, and the magic tricks are ramped up. Fakery, once a shared experience, is now a political device.

Authority in Embryo

At some point, the storyteller became more than just a talespinner. They became the interpreter. The one who could say, *"This is what the spirits meant. This is what the vision demands. This is how we all must live."*

Authority is born in interpretation. Anyone can see the mask, but not everyone claims to know its meaning. Anyone can hear the thunder, but only some say it's the voice of the gods. In this gap between perception and explanation lies the seed of power and control.

The earliest leaders weren't just hunters or gatherers; they were narrative specialists. They owned the bridge between experience and meaning. Fakery became the art of monopolizing the story.

The Magic of Distance

Think about the power of distance. The shaman's cave is dark, smoky, full of mystery. Not everyone sees what the shaman sees. The elder speaks with confidence about events long past, drawing on memories others can't access. The separation between performer and audience, between interpreter and believer, has become structural.

Distance magnifies authority. If only a few can access the sacred, then the rest must trust and obey. Fakery evolves from deception, but also from asymmetry. One sees, others can't. One interprets, others listen.

This dynamic will repeat endlessly. Priests with sacred texts, scientists with data, politicians with intelligence briefings - the cogniscenti who claim special access to knowledge hold sway over those who don't. And it all began with patterns of smoke.

Fear as Fertilizer

Illusion alone isn't enough. For illusions to take hold, they must appeal to emotions. And nothing makes an illusion more emotional than fear.

Fear of death, fear of famine, fear of exile, fear of the unknown. These primal anxieties made early humans hungry for stories that explained them. There's some comfort in ceding control. A ritual could offer solace, a myth could warn of consequences, a witch doctor could promise protection.

The genius of fakery lies in pairing fear with succour. The spirits may punish,

but they also protect. If you follow the ritual, if you obey the rules, if you heed the storyteller. Illusion works best when it terrifies and soothes in equal measure.

This is why the earliest myths gained so much traction. They didn't just entertain. They provided frameworks for survival while also reinforcing hierarchies of interpretation. They offered meaning when chaos threatened, and hope in times of turmoil. And all they demanded in return was the suspension of disbelief.

The Economics of Illusion

We often think of economics as trade in goods or services, but long before coins and markets, there was an economy of illusion. The shaman provided visions, rituals, and stories. In return, they got food, respect, and authority. The storyteller supplied entertainment and cohesion. In return, they were exalted. Illusions circulated as social currency.

The key was scarcity. If only one person could speak with the spirits, their illusions were precious. If only one mask was imbued with power, wearing

it elevated the performer. Illusion became a resource, hoarded and distributed strategically. Seen this way, fakery isn't just cultural, it's economic. It creates value, sustains exchange, and builds a pecking order. Today's attention economy, where memes and stories trade for clicks and money, is not a break from the past. It's a continuation.

The Meme Machine

When Professor Dawkins explained the meme, he described culture as an evolutionary system comparable to our understanding of how genes work. Like genes, ideas compete, replicate, and mutate. Those that resonate spread, and those that fail vanish. The earliest memes weren't internet jokes. They were survival stories.

- A tale of the trickster god teaches caution.
- A myth of ancestors watching over you from the sky teaches respect.
- A warning of monsters rampaging in forests teaches vigilance.

These memes spread not because they were "true" in a scientific sense, but because they were useful emotionally, socially, and existentially. But once memes spread, they can be hijacked. A leader can embed authority in the meme. *"The ancestors demand loyalty to me alone."* A ritual can encode a social order: the gods reward obedience to this scheme. What began as survival instruction mutates into ideology. Memes become the machinery of power.

The Continuity of Fakery

Looking at caves and rituals, it's tempting to see them as primitive, a phase we've long outgrown. But strip away the costumes, and the structure remains shockingly familiar.

A cave wall flickering with shadows → a smartphone screen glowing in the dark.
A shaman interpreting a vision → an influencer hopping aboard a trend.
A myth repeated around a campfire → a meme shared across the world.

The tools have changed, but the underlying mechanics are consistent. Illusion works by repetition, spectacle, emotional resonance, and authority.

Fakery is simply the illusions wielded strategically.

This continuity matters because it preempts nostalgia. There was no pure age before manipulation. There was only a slower pace, smaller audiences, fewer channels. The gaslitcatfish is not a monster born of silicon. It is an ancient creature wearing a new skin.

The Double-Edged Gift

So here's the paradox we inherit: imagination is both our greatest gift and our greatest vulnerability. It allowed us to survive, to rehearse hunts, to share warnings, and to envision futures. But it also allowed us to deceive and manipulate. To construct realities that serve some at the expense of others.

We can't simply reject illusion, because it's inseparable from being human. What we can do is recognize its double edge. We can ask, *"Is this illusion serving survival, or consolidating control? Is this story sustaining life, or exploiting fear?"* These questions - probably also asked in caves thousands of years ago - are the same

we must ask now, in between scrolling through feeds saturated with digitalia.

Toward Authority

As rituals became codified, myths became laws, and storytellers became rulers, the role of fakery grew bigger. The leap from shaman to priest, storyteller to monarch, was less about new inventions and more about scale and systematization.

Once illusions were centralized, they no longer functioned primarily as survival rehearsal or record-keeping. They became instruments of power, tools of governance, mechanisms of obedience.

The next stage in the story is when illusion ceases to be simply smoke and shadow and becomes divine mandate, royal spectacle, and political theatre. Fakery consolidates. Authority dons its first crown.

Closing Thesis of the Chapter

Illusion isn't a glitch of culture; it's the foundation. Humans have always lived in layers of imagination. Illusion gave

us art, ritual, community, and meaning. It was, to some extent, our first survival technology.

But the tools that allowed us to survive also allowed us to deceive and be deceived. Fakery emerges not as an invention but as a mutation. The twisting of imagination into manipulation. The monopolization of stories and role-playing led to the consolidation of ritual into authority.

Chapter II showed us that what we face today isn't new to us. The memes, the deepfakes, the influencers, and the algorithms all recycle the same basic strategies first tested in caves on mushroom trips. One imagines they were pretty wild parties. The difference here is scale. The gaslitcatfish was probably first spawned in a psychoactive jelly.

As we move into Chapter III, we'll see how illusion became institutional. How gods, kings, and the magic of stories formalized fakery into systems of rule. The shadow on the wall becomes a symbol of divine order. The mask becomes a crown. The audience becomes a retinue.

The curtain is ready to rise on the next act of our story, where, for the first time, illusion gets a proper grip on authority.

Gaslitcatfish: They're Called Dreams Because You Must Be Asleep to Have Them

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CHAPTER III

GODS, KINGS, AND MAGIC TRICKS – AUTHORITY AS PERFORMANCE

The sky darkens in the middle of the day. Panic ripples through the crowd. Livestock moan, birds go silent, village people scream that the end of time has come. And then, as if on cue, the priest steps forward, arms uplifted, voice booming in the haze. He declares that the gods are punishing the people for their sins - but if they obey, if they repent, if they honour their covenant, the sun will return. The frightened people duly bow their heads. And sure enough, minutes later, the light returns. The priest smiles. The crowd bows. From roots like these, authority grows strong.

It was never about the eclipse itself - it was about who knew the script. Men had been studying the sky for aeons, and a chosen few had passed on their memories of similar events. And the priest wasn't lying, exactly. The sun did disappear, the darkness did terrify, and the return of the light certainly did feel like the mercy of the heavens. But the performance turned knowledge into control. The trick wasn't the astronomy; the trick was the pretense.

This is the pivot from Chapter II's caves and rituals. What began as communal imagination - visions shared by the fireside, masks passed around, and myths sharpened to an edge - becomes centralized. The shaman becomes a priest. The elder becomes a king. The mask becomes a crown. Illusion wears a cloak of authority.

Power as Theatre

We often think of power as force: swords, armies, laws, prisons. But power rarely survives on brute strength alone. The spear kills, but the crown convinces. Because there are usually more pawns than kings. People follow leaders not only because they fear punishment, but because they believe in the story they're told. The crown, the robe, the throne, and the bloodline are carefully tailored costumes in a political hippodrome.

Consider coronations. A monarch doesn't simply start ruling. They're paraded through rituals so baroque they make a Vegas show look minimalist. Trumpets blare, choirs sing, oils are dabbed on the body, and relics are waved in the face. Why? Because without the performance, authority is just someone in fancy clothes making claims. The arena is what transforms them into something more.

Performance legitimizes. It says: this person is not merely human, they are ordained, chosen, touched by forces beyond what the rest of us perceive. It doesn't matter if you believe the ceremony literally; the spectacle is executed with enough conviction to quell any disbelief. It overwhelms reason, floods the senses, and generates hot emotional vindication. Fakery doesn't need to persuade your mind; it needs to move your gut.

That's why kings and priests wrapped themselves in rituals that seemed excessive even in their own times. The production was the point.

Costumes as Technology

Think of the crown not as jewelry, but as an early piece of augmented reality hardware. It reframes whoever puts it

on their head. Place it on any idiot's noodle and suddenly they're "royal" and must be respected for no other reason. The costume modifies perception, and perception reshapes behaviour.

Uniforms work much the same way. A soldier in fatigues, a priest in vestments, a judge in robes; they all wield costumes as tools of automatic awe. You don't only see the person. You see the role. You bow to the authority.

And it doesn't stop with fabrics or headgear. Architecture is costume too. Thrones elevated on platforms. Temples perched on hills. Palaces sprawling above cities. Distance itself becomes a prop, paradoxically making rulers appear larger. And holier. And untouchable. The performance of authority relies on perspective: if you keep the ruler on the stage, you'll keep the people in the seats.

This is why many rulers and priests insisted on barriers - curtains, veils, sanctums. You couldn't just walk up and have a chat. Access was rationed. Distance magnified mystique. The divine was always hidden, revealed only through the sanctioned performer. Fakery consolidates when knowledge becomes monopoly.

The Birth of Structured Fakery

Here's the crucial shift: imagination was once distributed. Anyone could tell a story around the fire. Anyone could sketch on a cave wall. But once elders, priests, and kings stepped in, illusion became a centralized affair. Authority calcified around those who claimed exclusive rights to interpret the invisible.

This is structured fakery. Not improvisation, but echelon ranking. I know what you don't. Therefore, obey.

Priests controlled the calendars, predicting eclipses and floods. Kings claimed descent from gods or heroes. Court magicians staged miracles. All were direct displays of power; knowledge wrapped in esoteric mystery, and theatre weaponized as control.

The genius of this system wasn't that it fooled everyone forever. Many probably suspected the trickery. But suspicion doesn't matter when the performance works on a massive scale. The eclipse does end when the priest commands. The king does sit higher on the belvedere. The robe does shimmer in candlelight. What you feel in those moments outweighs what you think.

And so the fakery hardens into infrastructure.

Magic Tricks of the State

Let's pause and call these spectacles what they are: magic tricks.

Stage magicians today rely on misdirection: get the audience to look at one hand while the other does the dirty work. Ancient rulers did the same. They conjured legitimacy by focusing attention on the spectacle while concealing the actual mechanics of power.

- The Oracle at Delphi: smoke, riddles, and priestly interpretation turned ambiguous mutterings into divine prophecy. In reality, it was a combination of hallucinogenic vapours and clever framing.
- Egyptian Pharaohs: their colossal statues and pyramids weren't just monuments; they were dreams of eternity. Scale itself was the trick: make something too big to ignore, and people assume it must be divine.
- Roman Triumphs: generals staged parades with prisoners, spoils, and chariots, creating dramas that fused military conquest with divine favour.

None of this was "mere ritual." It was political technology. It was illusion buffed up into governance.

Authority as Script

Notice how the performance requires scripting. A king is nothing without a court choreographing his image. Every bow, every procession, every word is carefully staged. Even silence can be scripted: the sacred pause, the dramatic delay before a proclamation.

Thus, court jesters, actors, and storytellers were never far from the seat of power. Rulers understood instinctively that power needed dramaturgy. They employed directors before the theatre even had a name.

And this continues today. CEOs rehearse donations. Politicians stage "spontaneous" town halls. Even authoritarian strongmen, who model authenticity, are acting, crafting photo ops with long tables, staged tears, and smartly placed flags. The costume has changed from a crown to a suit, but the recital is the same.

Fakery and Fear

Illusion works best when paired with fear. A crown means little without a threat behind it. The eclipse isn't just mysterious - it's terrifying. The pharaoh isn't just divine - they control whether you're punished in this life or the next.

Fear sharpens the trick. Authority is always a double matinee: awe and terror in equal measure. Kings promise protection from chaos, priests promise salvation from damnation. But only if you obey. The show is sold as a bargain. The spectacle does the dazzling, the threat seals the deal.

This is why so many myths cast rulers as mediators between worlds. They weren't just the people in charge; they were the only thing standing between you and disaster. To doubt them was not mere rebellion - there was a stated existential risk. Fakery thrives when disobedience is cast as doom.

The Economics of Authority

Behind it all lies an economy. Priests didn't perform rituals for free; they were fed, clothed, and housed by their communities. Kings didn't stage parades out of generosity; they extracted tribute and taxes to fund the show. Illusion was a business model.

The exchange went like this: you, the subject, hand over food, labour, or

loyalty. In return, the ruler provides security, the priest supplies salvation, the magician performs miracles. Illusion circulates as currency, and belief becomes a commodity.

And just as today's influencers trade authenticity for likes and sponsorships, ancient authorities traded illusion for obedience. Fakery was monetized long before money even existed.

Case Study: Alexander's Lightning

Take Alexander the Great. Obviously a brilliant strategist, he was also a cunning illusionist. After conquering Egypt, he declared himself the son of Zeus-Ammon, a hybrid deity. This wasn't a casual boast. He staged visits to oracles that confirmed his godhead, wore distinctive costumes of exotic materials, and cultivated lightning imagery that suited the role.

The effect was twofold: enemies naturally hesitated to fight a "god," and soldiers believed they were invincible under his divine command. Was it true? Of course not. Did it matter? Again, not. The illusion fueled his empire, and he basked in the glory.

Alexander understood what every great ruler has learned: you don't need

to prove the trick, you just need to perform it well enough that people are captivated by it.

The Continuity of Performance

The story of authority is the story of performance. From priests predicting eclipses to monarchs wearing crowns to dictators staging rallies, power is always theatrical. Fakery consolidates when the performance becomes institutional.

This is why courts, parliaments, and churches all have stages. Literally. Thrones, pulpits, podiums: they're platforms for illusion. Authority doesn't just happen; it's plotted into existence.

And here's the uncomfortable truth: most people want it this way. Performance soothes. It provides order, meaning, and reassurance. A world without spectacle feels raw, unstable, even terrifying. So we buy the ticket and we watch the show. We clap when we're told, we kneel when commanded, and we salute when expected. We suspend disbelief not because we're fools, but because we need assurance.

That craving is the real secret of fakery. It doesn't exploit ignorance; it exploits need.

When Myth Becomes Law

Stories, once shared for survival, began to solidify into commandments. The myths weren't just tales told around the fire anymore - they were written, recited, and enforced as law. What started as an explanation turned into legislation.

"Thou shalt not" isn't just advice; it's a narrative fused with authority. And once rules are framed as divine, they're no longer open to negotiation. Disobey the king, and you might be punished. Disobey the gods, and you risk spiritual torment and eternal damnation. Authority becomes unchallengeable when myth is weaponized as law.

Hammurabi's Code, for instance, wasn't just a set of regulations - it was framed as descending from Shamash, the sun god. The stone stele on which it was carved depicted the king receiving divine authority in eternal relief. It's not simply "because I said so." It's "because heaven itself says so." That's a different level of command.

The law isn't fake in the sense of being untrue; it really does regulate society. But the claim of divine origin is the sleight of hand. Legitimacy doesn't come from consent of the governed; it comes from the story invented to explain the cosmic order.

Sacred Kingship

Across the ancient world, rulers turned themselves into gods. Egypt's pharaohs weren't only political leaders; they said they were Horus incarnate. Mesopotamian kings claimed divine mandate. In Japan, emperors told the people they were descendants of Amaterasu, the sun goddess.

This wasn't symbolic rhetoric; it was lived reality. Rituals reinforced it daily. Subjects bowed to rulers, but also to divinity embodied. Death masks, mummification, mausoleums - all were props in the longest-running play of all time: the extravaganza of sacred kingship.

This "sacred kingship" was fakery institutionalized. It made dissent almost comically impossible, because disobedience wasn't just treason; it was blasphemy. The crown wasn't just a costume; it was an ontology. The king had been written into the story.

Early Propaganda Machines

Authority doesn't survive long without repetition. Just as memes today spread

by being shared endlessly, ancient rulers learned to saturate the environment with symbols. Coins bore the faces of rulers. Temples glorified dynasties. Victory monuments retold battles in aspirational, heroic terms.

It was all about scale. One inscription in a village might not persuade. A thousand monuments across an empire, however, could drown out all alternatives. Fakery thrives when all the competing stories are erased.

The Persian Empire's Behistun Inscription is a good example. Carved high up on a cliff, it depicted King Darius crushing rebels and receiving favour from Ahura Mazda, the chief deity of the Zoroastrians. Few could actually read the text, but the awe-inspiring permanence - stone and scale and divine sanction - did the trick. Fakery doesn't need to be legible to be effective; it simply needs to be overwhelming.

The Illusion of Consensus

One of the oldest tricks in authority's playbook is manufacturing consensus. Parades, assemblies, and public sacrifice are all designed to prove that "everyone" believes. When you see everyone else bowing, you're far more likely to bow yourself.

This is the social glue of fakery: the performance generates conformity. A ruler doesn't need to convince every skeptic individually. They only need to create the appearance of mass belief. The illusion becomes real once enough people nod along.

Roman emperors were masters at this. The Colosseum wasn't only for entertainment; it was a consensus-building machine. Crowds cheered as emperors distributed bread and presented pageants. The performance said, "Look, the gods bless the empire! Let the people rejoice!" A position reinforced by the slaves dying in the arena or the dissenters crucified outside the city gates.

Authority doesn't ask for unanimous conviction or universal consent. It demands visible performance of belief. Stand up, cheer, march, salute. Conform, and you'll be fine.

Distance and Access

A great secret of performance is distance. Close up, the trick is exposed; from afar, it enchants. Authority learned this early. Kings placed their thrones on raised daises,

priests hid rituals behind velvet curtains, emperors sat in palaces miles away from the peasants.

Distance augmented mystique. The fewer who could see the seams, the stronger the illusion. That's why religious elites guarded sacred texts, monarchs restricted access to their persons, and courts developed elaborate etiquette. Power thrives on scarcity. If only a few can enter the holy place, then entry becomes a priceless commodity, and those with permission to enter grow rich in influence.

We still see this today. Politicians stage "unscripted" handshakes behind brocade ropes. Tech bros appear exclusively in astroturfed keynotes. Celebrities rely on strictly controlled access, dripping just enough "authenticity" to maintain demand. Authority has always been a game of rationed visibility.

The Double Bind of Belief

The paradox is that people often saw the illusions for what they were. The Roman Senate joked often about imperial deification. Medieval peasants sometimes laughed at relics of "saints" that looked suspiciously like random

bones. Cynicism is not a modern invention.

But fakery works even when it's doubted. Why? Because disbelief is costly. Mock the priest, and you risk damnation, or at least social ostracism. Scoff at the king, and you may well lose your head. Illusion doesn't need literal belief. It relies on participation.

That's the double bind: you might not buy the trick, but you'll clap anyway. And in clapping, you reinforce the illusion for everyone around you. This is why authority always demands ritual displays. They don't prove loyalty; they produce it.

Spectacle and Violence

Of course, performance alone wasn't enough. Every play needs stagehands, and they're usually armed with sticks. Authority always paired spectacle with shows of force. Public executions, military parades, bloody pogroms; these were as much theatre as punishment.

The execution of Socrates wasn't just about silencing a dissenter; it was a demonstration of Athenian law. The crucifixion of rebels under Rome was more than a deterrent. It was a sight

designed to terrify. The guillotine in revolutionary France was both a punishment and a public showpiece.

Violence staged out in the open is itself a magic trick: it turns fear into obedience. The audience leaves not thinking about justice, but about survival. And survival means following the script.

The Ruler as Magician

Think of authority as a stage magician with a whole empire for an audience. The ruler distracts with impressive costumes, amplifies awe with architecture, scripts intrigue and consensus through repetitive ritual, and silences skeptics and naysayers with fear or greed.

Like all magicians, rulers rely on collaboration. Every subject who bows, every courtier who flatters, every priest who repeats the myth plays along with the trick. The magician never works alone. The audience is always complicit.

This collusion is why fakery is so resilient. Authority doesn't just deceive; it actively enlists. Once you're part of the play, you're invested in its continuation.

From Ritual to Bureaucracy

Over time, the performances solidified into bureaucracies. What began as a spontaneous occurrence became a scheduled routine. Calendars filled with festivals. Courts developed rules and regulations. Rituals became standardized.

And so, performance hardened until it became institutional. Once authority is routinized, it no longer feels like theatre - it feels like life. You don't notice the trick when you were born inside it.

Max Weber called this the "routinization of charisma." A prophet's ecstatic visions, formerly numinous, become codified as laws and statutes. A charismatic conqueror's personal magnetism becomes the bureaucratic machinery of monarchy. The play is now a franchise.

Fakery's Feedback Loop

Here's the kicker: fakery doesn't just project authority, it creates it. The performance generates belief, the belief generates blind obedience, and obedience generates yet more performance. It's an endless feedback loop.

The priest predicts the eclipse, the eclipse obeys, the people bow, the priest gains more power, the next performance grows even grander. The king stages a coronation, the crowd cheers, the treasury swells, the next ritual builds a bigger palace. Fakery feeds itself.

That's why rulers spend so much on pageantry. The return on investment is huge. Illusion doesn't merely decorate power. It manufactures it.

Case Study: Qin Shi Huang and the Terracotta Army

China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, unified several warring states through ruthless force. but he cemented his legacy through theatre. His tomb, guarded by thousands of life-sized terracotta soldiers, was not meant to be seen in his lifetime. It was a performance staged for eternity.

The army wasn't functional; it was symbolic. It said, *"I am not just an emperor in life, I'm an emperor forever."* The illusion didn't need an audience of contemporaries; it was squarely aimed at eternity.

That's the stark audacity of authority performance: it isn't content with ruling people. It wants to rule time itself.

Authority as Dreamworld

In the end, authority is a dreamworld. It creates narratives so immersive that waking up is impossible. Kings claim to mediate between earth and heaven. Priests claim to speak for gods. Emperors claim to embody perpetuity.

And the people, whether skeptical or not, live inside the dream. They arrange their lives around festivals, rituals, and hierarchies. The fakery becomes so embedded that distinguishing between dreaming and reality isn't an option.

This is the gaslitcatfish dynamic in embryo: authority convinces you to doubt your own perceptions and accept the scripted performance instead. You might know the priest is just a man, but the eclipse convinces you otherwise. You might suspect the king is just a warlord, but the coronation shows you his divinity.

Authority never demands that you stop thinking. It demands that you feel the performance more strongly than you heed your doubts.

From Gods to God

As empires crumbled and new religions rose, authority performance shifted its focus. Instead of many gods tied to specific rulers, monotheistic faiths streamlined the illusions into one overarching narrative: there is only one God, and He has chosen this authority to represent Him on earth.

This was a major upgrade to fakery's operating system. Polytheism allowed for the wiggle room of competing claims: your kings have their gods, ours have ours. But monotheism allowed no competitors. If the priest says the only god there is ordained the king, then obedience is no longer optional; it's what you now believe is a fact.

Christianity, Islam, and the divine right of kings in Europe all capitalized on this. The con was no longer told as, "I rule because some gods with names we know said so." Now it was, "I was chosen by the Maker, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings." That's a much harder illusion to walk away from.

Cathedrals as Illusion Machines

Medieval Europe also perfected the architectural performance. Cathedrals weren't built to house congregations comfortably. They were constructed to inundate the senses. Walk into Chartres or Notre-Dame and you're immediately dwarfed. The ceilings stretch higher than your neck can crane. Stained glass floods the room with glorious colours. Incense fogs the air, and choirs echo like angels.

This is sensory engineering. The cathedral is a machine designed to make you feel small, wonderstruck, and saturated with the knowledge of divine certainty. You might never see the king or meet the bishop, but the building itself exercises authority on their behalf.

Architecture is the stage. Light and sound are the special effects. Authority immerses as it speaks.

Relics and Holy Fakery

Relics are perhaps the most audacious illusion props that have ever been deployed. A bone fragment said to be that of a saint, a piece of wood claimed to be a splinter from the One True Cross, a vial of dried holy blood that liquefies dramatically when shaken - these were circulated, displayed, and monetized across Christendom.

Were they authentic? Of course not - there were enough fragments of the cross circulating in medieval Europe to build a Black Forest. But authenticity was never the point. The performance was. Pilgrims saw the relic, paid homage, and donated their wealth. The relic didn't need to be real to operate with real authority.

This is fakery in its purest form: objects whose value lies not in their material reality, but in the belief they command. A bone is just a bone until it's wrapped in a story, placed in a reliquary, and unveiled with pomp and incense. Then it becomes authority incarnate.

Kingship as Theatre of God

The medieval monarch wasn't just a ruler; he was God's own appointed great actor. Coronation ceremonies fused church and state into a single entity. Archbishops anointed kings with holy oil, the robes were blessed, and the swords were sanctified. The performance said, *"The king is not just powerful; he has been chosen by God."*

The "divine right of kings" was less a doctrine than an excellent magic trick. It told subjects: to resist me is to resist God. Even if you doubted the king's morality, you would never dream of doubting the deity's wisdom in choosing him. The theatre of coronation was designed to make any mention of rebellion unthinkable.

Here, the line between illusion and law becomes invisible. The performance wasn't decorative anymore. It was the constitution of authority itself.

The Pageantry of War

Medieval warfare was also staged. Knights wore gleaming armor not just for protection, but to bedazzle the rabble. Banners flapped, horns blared, and heraldry turned wargames, battles, and manoeuvres into grand cinema.

Tournaments and jousts extended this into peacetime. Knights displayed their martial skill before the crowds, reinforcing not only their own status but the chivalric myth that upheld the nobility. Fakery here was less about deception and more about repetition: the endless performance of a social order that naturalized hierarchy.

Even executions were rendered like plays. Traitors were paraded through the streets before their hangings or

beheadings, their deaths served as warnings enacted for maximum impact.

The Mask of Sainthood

We should pause to note that not all performers were kings or priests. Saints themselves were figures of theatre. Martyrdom was depicted for public consumption: tortured bodies were exhibited as evidence of divine truth. Miracles, whether spontaneous or specifically orchestrated, became affirmations that proved the faith.

The line between holy performance and political performance shifted constantly. Joan of Arc was a prophet and a soldier, a mystic, a symbol, and a heretic. Her conflagration wasn't just intended to kill, but to delegitimize the very theatre she had embodied.

Authority has always been about who controls the script and who gets burned for improvising.

Early Modern Upgrades: Printing the Performance

With the invention of the printing press, authority performance scaled up yet again. Pamphlets, edicts, and illustrated bibles multiplied the spectacle beyond cathedrals and courts. Where once authority was staged only locally, it could now be distributed further afield.

Monarchs circulated portraits, carefully idealized images showing them as stoic, noble, and eternal. Queens like Elizabeth I wrapped themselves in symbolic iconography: the Virgin Queen, mother of her people, untouchable and ethereal. Every gesture, every brushstroke, every word was finetuned.

The trick here was consistency. If the same face, the same script, the same myth appeared everywhere, then reality would bend toward it. Fakery at scale becomes truth by the heft of sheer repetition.

The Divine Right as Gaslight

By the 16th and 17th centuries, kings leaned fully into performance as divine mandate. Louis XIV of France styled himself the "Sun King," presenting Versailles as an endless exhibition where courtiers orbited him like planets. Everything from attire to architecture to etiquette reinforced the celestial enterprise.

Louis didn't rule; he performed ruling. He held daily ceremonies where attendants watched him wake up and get dressed. It was absurd, but also effective. The message was clear: *"Even my most mundane acts are sacred art. You exist to witness me."*

This is authority as gaslighting *avant la lettre*. The illusion is so total, so captivating, that the idea or the word becomes the thing itself.

Cracks in the Stage

But performances always express their own cracks, too. Fakery works until it doesn't. The Reformation was, in many ways, a revolt against performance. Luther's theses didn't challenge doctrine so much as they called out the show business of indulgences, relics, and papal pageantry.

The Enlightenment, too, was a backstage critique. Philosophers mocked coronations, questioned miracles, and began to dismantle the playhouse. Fakery, once inconspicuous, became obvious. And if it was visible, it could be ridiculed.

Authority never disappears, but its performances mutate. When the stage collapses in one form, say, a monarchy claiming divine right, it inevitably resurfaces in another - nationalism proclaiming the will of the people, for instance. Fakery is a resilient shapeshifter, and it adapts well.

Authority as Precedent for Today

Looking back, we can see the continuity. Authority has always been less about raw muscle and more about good acting. Priests blessing bread and wine. Pharaohs carving eternity in stone. Medieval kings wrapped in oil, waving relics, and modern monarchs strategizing relief efforts, cheek by jowl with the commoners.

The props change: robes, crowns, cathedrals, Versailles. The illusions change: divine mandate, sacred relics, absolute monarchy. But the trick remains the same. Power, while it's held, is performed.

And the performance always asks the same thing of you: you are to suspend disbelief indefinitely. Play along. Bow when you're told to. Salute on command. Whether you believe or not is of no consequence; participation is the nourishment that sustains the illusion.

Prelude to the Meme Machine

We'll have a short interlude before the next chapter, a palate cleanser, if you will. Chapter IV describes the medieval and early modern "meme machine." Cathedrals, relics, and pageantry meant fakery wasn't isolated anymore. It was now the infrastructure that peddled the delusions to the masses.

Think of this as the very first viral content. Relics circulated like memes. Pilgrimages spread like hashtags. Sermons in cathedrals were the medieval equivalent of viral posts. It was sensory overload designed with one thing in mind: to capture and hold attention.

Authority had perfected performance. The next step was industrializing it; mass-producing illusion through printing, pamphlets, and eventually, radio and other mass broadcast technologies.

But that's the next act. For now, we close the curtain on kings and priests, relics and coronations, remembering this: the show was never optional. To live in their world was to live in the theatre. And no theatre ever admits that its props are just for show.

Gaslitcatfish: They're Called Dreams Because You Must Be Asleep to Have Them

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INTERLUDE

THE HOUSE LIGHTS GO DOWN

The torches burn low. The banners droop. The crowd goes home, leaving footprints and silence. For this moment, the stage of history stands empty.

This is the quiet between performances, a time for everyone to catch their breath and mouth, *"WTF?"* at each other.

We forget that every empire, every ritual, every holy spectacle died eventually. The kings got old. The priests got caught. The actors died.

But the script remained - the bare, bleached bones of our story - tucked away in parchment, stone, and memory.

That's the thing about performance: it outlives the performer. The show collapses, but the director's notes survive.

If you concentrate, you can almost hear it. The hum of choreography. As the ghost-light glows in intermission lighting, you can sense the residue, thick in the air like incense, overbearing enough to make people kneel without thinking.

We like to imagine ourselves as more sophisticated now. We think we've left behind the trappings of pageantry. But the theatre hasn't ended, it's just changed venues. The screens are smaller, the costumes cheaper, the scripts frightfully algorithmic. The actors smile from timelines instead of horseback.

Here, between acts, before the printing press spins and the meme machine begins to gather pace, it's worth pausing.

Because illusion isn't just something others use against us. It's something

we want. The world would be unbearably dull without stories to frame it, without symbols to bind it, without someone - anyone - to stand in the light and tell us it means something.

The stage goes dark, but not for long. In the wings, new performers are rehearsing. The props gleam under candlelight for now, but we're going from parchment and quill to steampunk gearing. Soon, illusion will evolve again. It'll be faster, louder, and mass-produced.

But for now, breathe. The curtain has fallen. The next act belongs to the architects, the printers, and the plots to make blind belief go viral.

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