



## **Adam Curtis's Documentary *HyperNormalisation* (2016)**

### **An Integrated Analysis**

#### *HyperNormalisation*

ADAM CURTIS

BBC, 2016

2h y 46 minutos

#### *Hipnocracia*

*Trump, Musk y la nueva arquitectura de la realidad*

JIANWEI XUN

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By SEYEDEHNAZANIN MOUSAVIMALEKI

Graduada del máster en Historia Contemporánea, UAB



### **Introduction**

Adam Curtis's documentary *HyperNormalisation* shows in a profound and vivid way how the elites and the powerful in late modern society create simplified and fabricated realities in order to maintain social and political control. These fictitious realities make the complex and changing world around us manageable and understandable to the

public but in reality, this image unrealistic and distorted provides an opportunity for greater control and limitation of criticism and protest.

Jianwei Xun's examination of *Hypnocracia*, which can be translated as "The State of Hypnosis," complements this from another angle. He shows that these artificial realities are not just simple deceptions and lies, but also act as a vast social sleep, where society's collective attention is directed to controlled propositions and the ability to think critically is reduced; In other words, a kind of collective hypnosis that advances the governments of power without question or challenge.

This article aims to combine and develop Adam Curtis's perspective on reality manipulation and social control with the hypnocratic theoretical framework of Jianwei Xun. The aim is to show how in contemporary societies, in addition to constructing fictitious facts, deception and creating apathy and passivity in people has been intelligently and systematically organized. In other words, how this social dream makes people play an active role. They should not criticize and change, and the powers should seek to establish order and control without resistance.

### **The Concept of Hypernormalization and Hypnocracy**

Adam Curtis's concept of hypernormalization has deep similarities to Jianwei Xun's idea of hypnocracy. Both show that today's societies are trapped by illusions created and maintained by elites that systematically distort people's perceptions and consciousness.

Hypernormalization refers to the way in which false and "normal" facts, even when they are completely unrealistic, are recognized by the majority. On the other hand, hypnocracy delves deeper into the ways in which this fraudulent acceptance is guaranteed, such as incessant media saturation, spectacle performances, repeated messages, and manipulation of people's emotions.

In today's world, news media, social networks, and digital platforms play a central role in shaping these illusions. For example, the vast amount of information is often accompanied by selective and directional narratives that are more used to control emotions and direct public opinion rather than to illuminate reality. Review is devoid of critical thinking.

Explaining the state of hypnocracy, Xianwei Xun says that the collective mind is "enchanted" by constructed images and narratives, and that even when these narratives are manifestly ineffective or false, people accept them without question. There are many examples of this phenomenon, for example in contemporary politics, where simplistic and emotional slogans and stories take the place of complex realities, and constructive criticism fades. This situation resembles a collective sleep, which causes discontent to remain passive and power structures to remain unchallenged further.

On the other hand, in the age of new technologies, social media algorithms are designed to highlight exciting, often inaccurate or biased content in order to capture and

retain people's attention. These methods exacerbate hypnocracy because people are in a state of passive focus on repetitive and controlled messages, and the ability to analyze and disagree is reduced.

Ultimately, the combination of hypernormalization and hypnocracy shows how modern power has moved away from overt and direct control to rule through illusions and social dreams, in which people collectively recognize false facts as truth while failing to challenge unjust political and economic orders.

### Historical context and political focus

The book *Hypnocracy* by Jianwei Xun confirms and complements Adam Curtis's vision of the 1970s, a period that they say marks the dawn of a new era in politics. During this period, traditional ideologies lost credibility and elites resorted to manipulating collective hypnosis to maintain control.

This change, which coincided with the rise of neoliberalism and financial capitalism, was not limited to the restructuring of the economy, but also brought about important changes in media methods. Instead of simple information, the media became tools of engineering the collective mind, where they mesmerized the audience by using simulations and dramas devoid of deep content, over-covered crises, and short, simple slogans. They present complex issues in a digestible and calming way.

A prominent example that Curtis addresses is the endless wars and conflicts in the Middle East. For Jianwei Xun, this is also a reflection of the "politics of hypnosis," where fictitious images of great victories or catastrophic defeats hide the painful realities and long-term turmoil behind these crises. These theatrical performances serve both to distract and justify global audiences Continued military and political interventions are employed.

As a result, these shows are considered clear symbols of the normalization of violence within the framework of hypnocracy through which the powers maintain their control and domination without serious resistance.

### Narrative style and use of archival images

Adam Curtis's documentary narrative style is strongly in line with Jianwei Xun's idea of political power working through the creation of a "media trance." In *HyperNormalisation* Curtis uses a combination of repetitive images, occasional eerie sounds, and symbolic cultural references that masterfully reconstruct the process of social hypnosis. This montage is not just an account of events, but also of itself It is an experience of confusion and alienation that are the main prerequisites in modern political hypnosis.

In his book *Hypnocracy*, Xun explains that presenting information in fragments, layers, and fragments dramatically reduces the cognitive resistance of the audience. This

method of presentation puts the viewer in a state of "trance", a state in which the mind is unconsciously attracted to the images and narratives that are made, and instead of criticizing and analyzing, it engages in maintaining its illusions. In other words, the presentation of this information makes each viewer not only not notice the manipulations, but also participates in the reproduction of the same illusions.

In Curtis's documentary, the fusion of popular culture, politics, and propaganda is done in a way that invites the audience to a multidimensional experience that is both fascinating and imaginative and cognitively confusing and distracting. This multi-layered combination is what captures life for the individual in a hypernormalized society: Where everything flows on a lifeless, artificial, and ambiguous level while at the same time making itself appear "real" and "normal".

The archival images that Curtis uses are often images that have been seen many times in different media, but they are arranged in a special order to create a completely different and sometimes contradictory narrative. This method of associating and distorting assumptions is the same techniques used in hypnocracy to create and perpetuate social sleep, in a way that the viewer is constantly torn between reality and narrative. The fictitious ones remain confused and cannot clearly discern the truth.

In addition, the narrator's voice, which often has a cold and cool tone, functions like a magic or repetitive word in the hypnosis process, which gives the audience a more reassuring and soothing mood. This formal voice, along with repetitive images and a rhythmic soundtrack, creates a false calming state that prevents any critical reaction or questioning. The sum of these elements makes the documentary not only a visual-auditory work, but also designed as a psychological experience that puts the audience in a cycle of power control, where not only the information but also the experience of receiving that information becomes a factor in maintaining the prevailing order and illusions.

This narrative style also emphasizes the gap between reality and its image, which has become an inherent feature in the postmodern environment. Such a method helps the viewer to feel confused from within today's tumultuous political environment, and this sense of unrest and lack of a coherent view of the story conveys well.

Overall, Curtis's narrative style and the way he designs images and sound in *HyperNormalization* is a prime and vivid example of what Schoen calls "hypnocracy": a government that governs more than the external imposition of power, through the engineering of social sleep and collective hypnosis, and in which people are not even willing to resist artificial realities because they have unconsciously shared that deep sleep.

### **Key Themes, Expanded with Hipnocracia Insights**

#### **1. Fake Realities as Hypnotic Constructs:**

In Xun's framework, the fake "normal" narratives Curtis highlights act as hypnotic scripts. These scripts simplify contradictions into digestible myths, keeping citizens in a mentally submissive state where questioning is neurologically suppressed by constant distraction and spectacle.

## 2. Loss of Agency and the Trance of Compliance:

*Hipnocracia* explains the passivity Curtis describes as the effect of social hypnosis—where individuals unknowingly enter a trance of compliance, perceiving the status quo as inevitable. This trance dulls political consciousness, discouraging active resistance or critical thought.

## 3. Technological Mediation as Hypnotic Amplifier:

Xun stresses how advanced media, digital platforms, and algorithmic feedback loops intensify the hypnotic effect identified by Curtis. The relentless flooding of disjointed images and curated content conditions mass attention and reinforces fragmented realities.

## 4. Political Hypnosis and the Death of Grand Narratives:

The disappearance of utopian ideologies in Curtis's film aligns with Xun's description of political hypnosis replacing transformative politics with mere spectacle management—a politics designed to maintain control through emotional manipulation rather than reasoned debate.

## Critical Reflections

The combination of Jianwei Xun's hypnocratic theory with Adam Curtis's documentary *HyperNormalization* gives us a deeper understanding of how power works in the present age, a power that not only creates illusions, but actively hypnotizes society to accept those illusions without question. The collaboration between Curtis's historical-political narrative and Xun's psychological-sociological analysis shows that today's reality is a combination of spectatorialism and mental conditioning and it is a political strategy.

However, both works have also received criticism. One of the most important is the broad scope and possible generalizations of these theories, especially since the concept of "collective hypnosis" may underestimate real resistance, active role and

grassroots initiatives, or the complexity of social change processes. In fact, these frameworks may sometimes neglect subcutaneous dynamics and micro-social efforts. Nevertheless, these perspectives are of significant importance in shedding light on the feelings of alienation, powerlessness, and passivity of millions of people, who, despite the enormous flood of information in the current era, still fail to understand the deep realities and hidden dimensions of power. In other words, these analyses help explain why people in a world full of information and news sometimes feel the most uncomfortable. They are powerful and remote.

### **Literary Reflections on Hypernormalization, Hypnocracy, and Bureaucracy**

The phenomena of hypernormalization and hypnocracy, vividly explored by Adam Curtis, serve as critical frameworks for understanding the socio-political and psychological impact of modern bureaucracies large, complex systems that enforce control through opacity, routine, and symbolic authority rather than genuine transparency or justice. These concepts echo powerfully through canonical 20th-century literature, where playwrights and novelists depict characters and societies ensnared by labyrinthine bureaucracies, systemic absurdity, and cognitive paralysis.

#### Harold Pinter's *The Hothouse*

Pinter's *The Hothouse* embodies the terrifyingly faceless nature of bureaucratic institutions as opaque machinery. The play's setting a mental institution riddled with surveillance and incompetence metaphorically represents the bureaucratic state described by Curtis's Hypernormalization: a system that perpetuates itself through fabricated realities and endless administrative procedures that obscure truth and genuine human connection.

- Bureaucracy as Theater: The institution in *The Hothouse* is a performance of power, where authority is maintained not through rational governance but through ritualized routines, secret meetings, and esoteric rules. This theatricality echoes Curtis's argument that modern political systems rely on "staging" realities that citizens are expected to accept, even when fundamentally false.

- Psychological Entrapment: Characters are locked in cycles of meaningless power plays and manipulated behavior, highlighting hypnocracy the population trapped in a hypnotic acceptance of their lack of agency. Pinter's use of silence and pauses exaggerates this psychological stasis, making the audience soak in the disorienting and oppressive atmosphere, underscoring how bureaucracy numbs critical faculties.

- Surveillance and Control: The play's intense surveillance mirrors the growing bureaucratic control mechanisms in government and corporations a subtle but pervasive

panopticon where autonomy is replaced by submission to unseen authorities. This pervasive observation reinforces the systemic illusion of order and security, one deeply critiqued by Curtis as a foundation of hypernormalization.

### Franz Kafka's *The Trial*

Kafka's novel is perhaps the quintessential literary blueprint for understanding bureaucratic absurdity and existential entrapment in hypernormalized societies.

- The Labyrinthine Bureaucracy: Josef K.'s ordeal before the opaque judicial system symbolizes the bureaucratic state as a monstrous maze designed for confusion rather than justice. The system's endless, incomprehensible procedures embody the hypernormalization condition: a society that normalizes the nonsensical as an unquestioned reality.

- Arbitrariness and Powerlessness: Kafka's portrayal stresses how bureaucracies exercise power not by transparent enforcement but by overwhelming the individual with irrational complexity and secrecy, fostering resignation and helplessness. The obsessive, futile quest for truth in *\*The Trial\** mirrors the individual's task in hypernormalized worlds trying to understand the engineered facade.

- Hypnocracy and Accepting the Unknowable: The passive acceptance of K.'s fate reflects the collective hypnosis or hypnocracy that Curtis identifies, where individuals internalize their lack of control. Kafka's bleak portrayal suggests that in such bureaucratic worlds, resistance is stifled not only by external constraints but by internalized helplessness and cognitive dissonance.

### Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

Beckett's minimalist masterpiece extends the exploration from bureaucratic tangibility to existential inertia and social paralysis.

- Suspension and Inaction: The endless waiting and indefinite postponement of change in *Waiting for Godot* metaphorically reflect the paralysis that Curtis associates with social hypnocracy where real agency is replaced by passive endurance within prescribed boundaries.

- Absurdity as a Condition of Control: Beckett's dismantling of narrative logic critiques rational structures, aligning with Curtis's discussion of hypernormalization, where official explanations for political and social phenomena no longer make sense but persist as normalized myths.

- Reflecting Bureaucratic Alienation: In the broader scope, the economy of words and repetitive dialogues evoke the alienation and meaninglessness that arise within institutional spheres dominated by rigid rules and empty rhetoric hallmarks of bureaucratic societies that prioritize form over substance.

- Liminality and Cognitive Suspension: The play traps characters in a liminal zone of “waiting,” analogous to a society suspended in a hypnotic state where hope and possibility are indefinitely deferred, ensuring the maintenance of the status quo rather than transformative change.

### Václav Havel's *The Memorandum* and *The Office*

Havel's satirical works offer a sharp and humorous critique of bureaucratic rationalization and the absurd social order it produces.

- Language as Control: Havel focuses on the “manipulation of official language”, illustrating how bureaucracies create elaborate systems of jargon and meaningless terminology to obfuscate reality, suppress dissent, and enforce conformity a direct illustration of hypnocracy's cognitive domination.

- Bureaucracy's Alienating Mechanisms: His characters embody the alienation caused by navigating endless paperwork, pointless hierarchies, and the “administrative dance.” These elements reveal how bureaucracy sedates critical thinking and autonomy by normalizing inefficiency and absurdity, turning individuals into compliant cogs.

- Call to Consciousness and Resistance: Unlike other works embracing despair, Havel offers a pathway to resistance: recognizing the absurdity as a first step to breaking the social hypnosis and reclaiming agency. This echoes Curtis's and Xun's calls for awakening from engineered inertia, suggesting that awareness can disrupt hypernormalization.

- Comedy and Tragedy of Systems: The satirical tone also underscores an important point: bureaucracy's control is not always overtly brutal, but often functions through ridicule and absurdity, which dulls the collective will much like a social anesthetic.

### **Synthesizing Literature, Hypernormalization & Bureaucracy**

What unites these works is a profound “literary interrogation of bureaucracy” as a device for producing hypernormalization a social state wherein false realities become

accepted as normal, and where systemic opacity paralyzes individuals psychologically and politically. The concept of “hypnocracy” highlights how this paralysis is maintained by mass cognitive suspension rather than outright coercion.

- Systems of Bureaucratic Illusion: Across these texts, bureaucracy is not merely an administrative apparatus but a “symbolic system” that manufactures illusions of order, legitimacy, and rationality those obscure underlying contradictions or injustices.

- Psychological Impact: The plays and novels capture how bureaucratic hypernormalization induces confusion, alienation, and helplessness on the individual level, making resistance or meaningful action seem impossible or irrational.

- Cultural Mirror & Critique: These artistic reflections serve as cultural diagnostics, diagnosing the psychological and social conditions Curtis identifies: the engineered social trance that sustains modern power structures.

- Urgency of Agency & Awakening: Ultimately, the literature not only exposes the mechanisms of control but also points to the “urgent need to cultivate critical awareness and reclaim agency” to break the spell of hypnocracy and challenge hypernormalized illusions.

## Conclusion

Adam Curtis's *HyperNormalisation* and Jianwei Xun's *Hipnocracia* together weave a sobering and layered diagnosis of late modernity an era not of clarity and progress, but of systemic illusion, political simulation, and emotional anesthetization. Both works argue, in their own idioms, that contemporary societies have not merely stumbled into confusion; rather, they have been deliberately lulled into a trance-like state, curated by political elites, corporate media, and algorithmic systems that reward obedience, emotional numbness, and passive consumption.

Curtis exposes a world in which complexity is edited out and replaced by simplified narratives an artificial order imposed upon disorder to maintain control. Meanwhile, Xun's *Hipnocracia* deepens the diagnosis by framing modern governance as a form of hypnotic theatre, wherein spectacle replaces substance, and citizens become spectators of their own alienation.

In this shared framework, truth becomes malleable, history becomes a loop of recurring myths, and dissent is not silenced through violence but through indifference an aestheticization of power that numbs resistance before it even begins. The result is a state of hypernormalisation: a condition in which the absurd becomes routine, and the

implausible becomes politically acceptable simply because no viable alternatives are allowed to enter the imagination.

What emerges from this analysis is not just critique, but a call to arms. Both Curtis and Xun suggest that the path to emancipation lies not in utopian fantasies or nihilistic despair, but in the cultivation of critical consciousness, media literacy, and a politics of imagination one that dares to disrupt the cycles of simulated stability. To awaken from this engineered dream requires not only intellectual clarity, but also emotional courage and collective will.

Ultimately, these works remind us that reclaiming agency in the 21st century is a deeply human act rooted in the refusal to accept manufactured normality, and in the bold gesture of asking difficult questions when silence is more comfortable. The screen may hypnotize, but the mind, once awakened, is a force of its own.

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