

Ihab Hassan

an excerpt of

The Way We Have Become: A Surfeit of Seeming

We are the bees of the invisible.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters*

To be visible all the time—to live
in a swarm of eyes—
surely that leaves its mark on the face.

—Tomas Tranströmer, “Solitude”

. . . The politics of perception is marketing by other means, and marketing, I submit, has become our obsession, our malady. America may always have been the land of entrepreneurs and hustlers glorying in greed, but what we experience today, as markets melt down before our eyes, is something else: the grip of an insidious hand outstretched. This is not high finance as we know it, not top-hatted capitalism. This is a radical reconception of human relations in terms of profit; it is an eversion of society itself, crunching credit (*credo*), subverting faith and trust.

Church, college, hospital, and local charity have an honored right to seek our support. But try to call a bank, publisher, mortician, insurance agent, health provider, phone or gas or credit card company without dodging a sales pitch. I am not speaking of the princes of skullduggery, men like Bernard Madoff, Michael Milkin, and Jeffrey Skilling, or of the ghouls of the subprime debacle; I am speaking of the way we live, all existence as spam. We even sell by pretending not to sell—it’s called “murketing”—and we buy in a trance. The “numerati”—omniscient analysts of the consumer age—see to that.

At this point, a voice usually snarls: “You gotta problem with spam? It circulates wealth, keeps the juices going, don’t it? It’s the American way, fella, get used to it.” I flinch but stand my ground, thinking: no, no, spam is a corruption of marketing, and marketing a corruption of giving and taking; they both undermine trust. We all fear not only the Mad Hacker but also the ubiquitous cadgers and subtlers prowling the Web. Once, knowledge promised power; now, trolling information—your data and mine—guarantees lucre. And that’s what happens to “marketing”—we used to say advertising—when it becomes evangelism, indistinguishable from civic or religious zeal. The gospel according to Nielsen.

But here is the outcome: the individual—the one with a surname, the one with a unique personal history and perhaps a few secrets to keep—fades happily into virtual space.