Jia Tolentino’s critique of social media, its grip on us, and the people it makes rich

Our lives are shaped by the information we consume—and we can’t do much about it.

by Rachel Pyle in the January 1, 2020 issue

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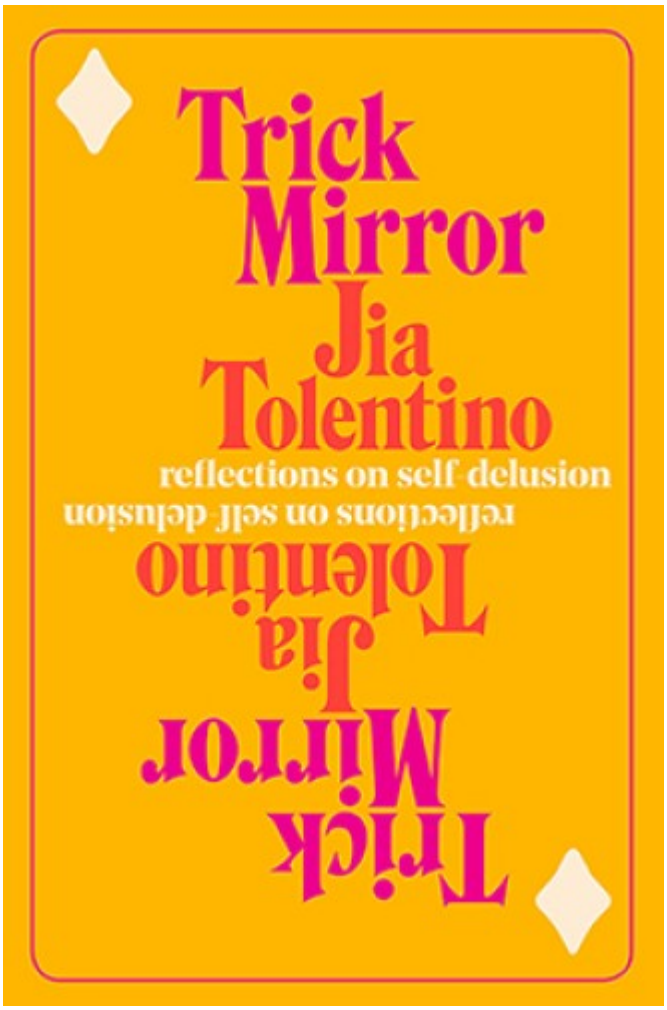

Trick Mirror

Reflections on Self-Delusion

By Jia Tolentino
Random House
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The endless news cycle bombards us with information that overwhelms our brain and lures us into a pattern of self-deception. We read about an issue, feel outrage, immediately post our opinion on social media, and feel like we've helped fix the problem. But we're not actually solving anything. We still shop at stores built on inhumane labor practices, we still watch movies featuring actors accused of sexual assault, and we still interact mostly with people who affirm our worldview. If we take no meaningful action to back up our opinions, what purpose does our knowledge serve? We deceive ourselves by believing that just knowing is enough.

Jia Tolentino examines this sense of deception in *Trick Mirror*. Her nine insightful essays reveal how our lives are shaped by the information we consume and explore the painful reality that there doesn't seem to be much we can do about it.

In the opening essay, "The I in the Internet," Tolentino writes about her childhood introduction to the World Wide Web. Like many children of the '90s, she quickly became obsessed with the internet. She describes the early days of online life as whimsical. This was the era of *You've Got Mail*, she notes, a time when the worst thing that could happen to a person online was to "fall in love with your business rival."

However, the good times did not last long. "The internet was dramatically increasing our ability to know about things, while our ability to *change* things stayed the same, or possibly shrank right in front of us," she writes. Critiquing the internet's influence on society and our psyches is big business and nothing new, but Tolentino offers an especially sharp perspective, explaining with precision how the evolution of our online personas has decreased our human agency.

With the rise of blogs (and later social media), the internet turned into an opinion-based economy, where having an opinion—any opinion—became one of the most important currencies in the modern world. This currency feeds into the performative aspect of human existence, making it a social requirement to be seen and to communicate online. It also fortifies the delusion that publicly commenting on a particular injustice equals activism.

Because this system rewards affirmation, it encourages people to communicate with those who think like themselves, leading to echo chambers within misshapen senses of self. “Possibly the most psychologically destructive distortion of the social internet is its distortion of scale. This is not an accident but an essential design feature: social media was constructed around the idea that a thing is important insofar as it is important to you.”

Using herself as an example, Tolentino, a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, acknowledges her discomfort at benefiting professionally from responding to other people’s opinions online. Part of our complicity comes from a sense of exhaustion, she believes. We feel outraged over the information we’re consuming and at the same time powerless to change the system. So we stay online, caught up in the cycle of consuming information and regurgitating it to the people in our sphere. One of the most disheartening ramifications of this reality is the way companies, advertisers, and politicians monetize social media activity, which Tolentino expounds in “Always Be Optimizing” and “The Story of a Generation in Seven Scams.”

In another standout essay, “Ecstasy,” Tolentino examines her relationship with her evangelical upbringing, the world of Houston hip-hop, and recreational drugs like ecstasy, each of which has provided a supernatural reprieve. “Like many people before me, I found religion and drugs appealing for similar reasons. Both provide a path toward transcendence—a way to accessing an extrahuman world of rapture and pardon that in both cases is as real as it feels.”

Part of the beauty of organized religion, she believes, is its simplicity: if you’re bad, you’re doomed. If you’re good, you’re favored. Tolentino writes about how blessed she felt as a child knowing that some unseen deity was caring for her. But her exposure to pageantry and politics eventually eroded her relationship to the church. “I have been walking away from institutional religion for a long time now—half my life, at this point, fifteen years dismantling what the first fifteen built.”

Her movement away from religion was steady throughout high school, but the desire for devotion didn’t cease. It was during this time that Tolentino began writing in earnest. “I turned my attention inward, tried to build a church on the inside, tried to understand faith as something that could draw me closer to something overwhelming and pure.”

All of the essays in the collection are brilliant and terrifying. Readers who want Tolentino to provide a prescription will be disappointed. She admits that when it

comes to changing the cycle, she’s just as lost as the rest of us. “We are asked to understand our lives under such impossibly convoluted conditions. I have always accommodated everything I wish I were opposed to,” she writes near the book’s end. “Here, as in so many other things, the ‘thee’ that I dread may have been the ‘I’ all along.”