The Power of the Image

The image as an instrument of power had been recognized by the late nineteenth century. In The Crowd, Gustave Le Bon analyzes the relationship between the image and power. He argues that the lower classes are susceptible to persuasion through the use of images. He says, “A crowd thinks in images and the image . . . calls up a series of other images." The images create illusions by which the masses can be governed. Whoever, he concludes, controls the image, has the power to produce illusions and has the power to control the masses. Le Bon’s analysis of the crowd influenced other sociologists, social psychologists, political theorists, the emerging public relations industry, and business people. Edward Bernays, the “father” of public relations, believed that the image was so powerful that it could create “the truth". The questions then that need to be answered are first what is the power of the image, why is it unique and why has it proven to be a successful instrument of power, and then, to what ends is the power of the image being deployed by the mass media.

First, the power of the image is not limited in the same ways that the other instruments of power are. Geographical boundaries are not limitations on the power of the image because the technology that disseminates the image can reach anywhere on the globe. The surrender of national sovereignty encoded in free trade agreements and the statutes of the World Trade Organization have eliminated national borders as boundaries that limit the dissemination of the image. Cultural boundaries can still limit the power of the image, but even these boundaries have been overcome by the power of the image.

Second, the image conceals its relation to power. It appears as “objective,” as a representation of reality. The truth, though, is that everything in the image, both foreground and background, is selected with a purpose. In television advertisements, not only everything within the advertisement is selected, but the production techniques are an essential component of the image. They are the same techniques that were developed earlier for film and television. They include techniques such as editing, camera angles and movement, lighting and sound . Because the image’s relation to power is concealed, the subject/object of manipulation does not know that it is being persuaded by the image. As Stuart Ewen says in his book All Consuming Images, “The secret of all true persuasion is to induce the person to persuade himself." And the image escapes rational critique, because, as a rhetoric of images, it does not reveal itself as discourse. Ewen concludes, “The image was conceived to be an effective antidote to critical thought.".

Most importantly, the image has the power not only to persuade, but to produce, or create subjectivities that can be easily manipulated, and the power to create a “reality” for these subjectivities to inhabit, a world of illusion in which they can delight. As Ewen says about the subject/objects of persuasion, they are able to take “delight in the unreal.”

The main ends towards which the power of the image is deployed by the mass media are to construct compliant, easily manipulable, subjectivities, consumers, who remain oblivious to the social forces that construct them and their desires. The power of the image is also deployed to create a second order reality of illusion that these compliant subjectivities can inhabit, a socially constructed “unreality.” And the image as an instrument of power is deployed by the mass media towards the end of stigmatizing and marginalizing specific groups who have been identified as being “less desirable” and/or recalcitrant in relation to the goals of neoliberal globalization .

The socially constructed subjectivities have several common traits. First of all, they suffer from anxiety. The source of the anxiety is the continual experience of lacking something. These subjectivities exist in a perpetual state of desire. The consequence of this is “all elements of lived experience constitute potential flaws” (p. 89). The subject becomes an eternal object of manipulation by the rhetoric of images.

The second trait is that the personality is unreflective. It lacks the capacity for critical self-reflection because it experiences itself as an object, an object that can only establish an identity through its participation in the world of desire. The limited reflection it can engage in is that it is “flawed.” It can not even imagine other possibilities because the capacity to imagine has been shaped by the power of the image. The third trait is arrested development; the personality does not develop; its life is an endlessly repetitive present, an “eternal return.” The power of the image creates desire, the subsequent anxiety compels the subject to organize it life around the possibilities of consumption. However, the acts of consumption are only temporarily satiating, because the rhetoric of the image continues to manipulate the consumer subject with new objects of desire in the world of illusion that it creates.

Ruben Alves captures this in a metaphor. Alves suggests that we imagine spending our lives in a small cabin from which there is no exit and no view of the outside world, no doors and no windows. We would consider ourselves prisoners. However, he suggests that we imagine spending our lives in a mansion with a thousand rooms but still without windows or doors. Each day we would be allowed to go from room to room, and in each room there would be new delights for us to experience, but there would still be no exit and no view of the world outside. This is our world and, he says, we call it freedom.

The mansion with a thousand rooms is the world of illusion that the power of the image has created for the consumer subject. Hannah Arendt (1976) analyzes what she calls “the lying world” in the context of totalitarian movements. She says that the ideology of the totalitarian movement creates a world that is more desirable than the real world; she calls this “the lying world.” This is analogous to the world of illusion, a utopian world that is created by the rhetoric of the image. This utopian world is “imagined” in the foreground of the advertisement, but even more importantly, it is imagined in the background of the advertisement. In this utopian world there is no traffic and all the inhabitants can afford luxury vehicles. Work is never onerous, dehumanizing, or alienating. Leisure time can be spent in bars and restaurants filled with beautiful, happy people, consuming without limits, or consequences. All homes are upper middle class, set in idyllic neighborhoods, uncontaminated by foreclosures, decaying infrastructure, homelessness, or gangs. There is no pollution, almost everyone is healthy, and if they are not, prescription drugs are accessible and affordable. Technology is progressive and helps utopians communicate anytime from anyplace at faster and faster speeds, with an almost uncountable number of “apps.” Technology allows utopians to be fully entertained in their upper middle class homes; everyone has access to the internet, utopian children are internet geniuses and adults through tutoring by their children can become competent. Three D movies in Blue Ray and the most technologically sophisticated video games are in every home. Corporations are good citizens in this utopia. They focus on what is best for the consumer, retirement plans, affordable comprehensive health, accident and life insurance, and clean energy production to maintain the healthy environment of the utopia.

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In the forests of central India, a war is being waged by the neoliberal Indian government against its own people, tribal people, who have inhabited the land on which they live for hundreds of years. Trillions of dollars of minerals have been discovered on land, so the people must be “relocated” or worse. Those who resist relocation are labeled “Maoists” by the government and once so labeled can be killed. The conventional instruments of power directed towards these ends, laws evicting them from their land, economic inducements, and extensive and growing military force, have only created more resistance. A local superintendent of police, ironically, understands the power of the images better than those in power, and has the solution. He says that the problem is the people are not “greedy.” “I have told my boss, remove the force and instead put a TV in every home."