

CHARLES CAMPBELL
ELECTION IMAGERY

“The present age...prefers...representation to reality.”

–Ludwig Feuerbach

“We live in Disneyworld.”

–Oliver Stone

“In his inability to observe, man contrives to be deceived.... We are blind because we see images.”

–Mahmoud Shabestari

WHETHER CONSIDERED AS ART OR MEDIA CONTENT, images need to be interpreted. There is a special problem in this regard for contemporary political discourse: the contentless image—the image that contains only other images—defies ready reading. In such a situation there is little possibility of interpretation, but plenty of room for projection. Thus man unmakes himself by following images rather than ideas.

In his film *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), Michael Moore asks whether there is any connection between the Columbine High School massacre and the production of intercontinental ballistic missiles in the same community where the massacre occurred. In a similar way, I wonder if there is some plausible connection between a policeman who kills an unarmed black man arrested for a non-violent crime in Ferguson and a government policy that imagines enemies among suspicious non-white people, images them on a computer screen, and kills them two continents away. The imagery is similar, and both involve judgment by image. They could be part of a motif. In any case, they both show that peasants are considered acceptable casualties in the drive for security, whether the children killed and the families destroyed are at home or far away.

In an article on a voyage to Antarctica, the main purpose of which was “to bring home images,” Jonathan Franzen prides himself on being the only

passenger who took no pictures.¹ Franzen's resistance to living in images is an individual response to a phenomenon theorized by Guy Debord in his 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle*, an account of contemporary society in which all human life is seen as a show or entertainment and we are all unconsciously complicit in avoiding anything real.² This scenario is somewhat like the film *The Truman Show* (1998), although everyone is in the position of Truman (not knowing that he is part of a TV show) and there is no way out. Thus, when observing *Pokémon Go* freaks in the park, one wants to shout "get a life!" to those committed without reservation to a world where images are the only reality and where mass-produced consumer items produce the images we live in and by.

This is the central problem of Donald Trump's recent election campaign. Trump clearly has the truth and depth of a t-shirt logo, and this is an elitist position only if you have given up on truth and depth (and perhaps hope). He is a fill-in-the-blank candidate; he is what you want him to be. At the same time, however, his appeal is partly that he is not faking any of his feelings; he is genuinely inhumane, vulgar, and thuggish. He is what he is without pretence (or pure pretence). He has no time for the mask of benevolent motives, yet "what he is" is ultimately an illusion, as his policies remain vague ("you'll win so much, you'll get tired of winning") and they will certainly require getting rid of a lot of people (like his TV show *The Apprentice*). Trump's whole image is thus paradoxical, and this may be his ultimate appeal: he is an anti-American patriot, a traditionalist who forswears the "great melting pot." He will build the mythical wall, pursue foreign wars, deport the base of the workforce (including childcare workers), and thereby solve the problem of the national debt. He tells Americans that their problems are due to one part of the workforce. This is the oldest trick in the book: turning workers against each other in order to better control, underpay, and under-protect them. Trump represents the social forces that have deprived working-class people of decent jobs and prevented any progress toward a just multi-racial society, while simultaneously masquerading as the solution to these very same problems. He is the worst kind of fraud, one with no stake in the game or in the divisiveness, violence, hatred, and incompetence he will unleash on an unsuspecting society. The anti-government bias of Americans has thus produced an outsider to any competence in governance and to any commonality with other Americans.

Trump is the perfect image candidate because he says what no other politician ever will. He is the image of a politician who has thrown off the image of a politician, a paradox that seems to involve the poor somehow

being connected to the rich, but only as a mirage, since his image of power is being impossibly rich, Scrooge McDuck rich, out of all conception and attainability. He even admits to being a non-candidate. He claims that if he had lost the election there would have been a revolution, thus implying a conspiracy that would spring solely from his own self-importance. He sees himself as the first people's president while at the same time denouncing democracy. With no financial debts to (other) wealthy men but a man without qualities except as the image candidate of wealth itself, he is not self-made, only rich; not successful, only ruthless; not a doer, only an image that has, really, nothing to do—the mere image of success and wealth and the illusion that you can have it too. Trump is the ultimate image candidate, as he represents the idea of money as the disembodiment of all human content, money taken as representative of all the good things in life (to the images of which we are all equally entitled)—imaged money as representative of real life and real values. This is a belief in the image pure and simple, where the “real” disappears into the mirror of conspicuous consumption.

Recognizing how images control us is often difficult because we are all part of the society of the spectacle. We also tend to be unaware of the fact that control over images is largely in the hands of media giants. They charge us for access to the images that have replaced our lives, images sold by them and so valued financially and morally. The dominance of the image occurred progressively: first there was photography and cinema, then TV became pervasive in our homes and lives, carrying cinema with it along with news, comedy, and drama, and now we have Facebook, Google, Youtube, and all the other visual resources of the internet that we pore over at home and carry around on smart phones wherever we go. We pay for “minutes” and for “roaming” to make sure we are never without the images that represent our lives. In this image-based society and economy, this image factory, all roads lead to Trump, as there is to be no break in the consumption of images as dominant in our way of life.

In a culture based on the image standard of exchange and social intercourse, the ultimate qualification is to be completely imaginary. We will make Sir Topham Hatt president because we like *Thomas and Friends*. And like Topham Hatt, Trump is also a character created in a book (*The Art of the Deal*) and adapted for a TV show (*The Apprentice*). The actual author of *The Art of the Deal*, Tony Schwartz, has expressed some pertinent opinions for the record: Trump has a short attention span, shows “a stunning level of...plain ignorance,” and does not even read books. He goes on: “There is no private Trump”; “All he is is ‘stomp, stomp, stomp’—recognition from the

outside, bigger, more, a whole series of things that go nowhere in particular"; and "Lying is second nature to him...[as he] has the ability to convince himself that whatever he is saying at any given moment is true."³ (Hitler and Mussolini also believed some of the ideas they strutted and murdered for.) Another point about the real Trump we should note is his racism; according to Kip Brown, a former Trump casino owner, "when Donald and [former wife] Ivana came to the casino, the bosses would order all the black people off the floor.... They put us all in the back."⁴ The fictional character "Donald Trump" was thus invented for a book and made consistent, successful, human, and interesting in order to improve sales.

The imaginary character created for the book then became the basis for the character of the "Master" on *The Apprentice*—a new and improved version designed for a mass audience. *The Apprentice* depicted a kind of master-slave relationship between the applicants for an executive position and the merciless, derisive CEO who interviews them, demeans them, turns them against each other, and rather sadistically dismisses them in succession with the words "you're fired." In other words, it's a show, in precarious economic times, about people getting fired! Most of the would-be execs suffer insults and degradation at the hands of the "Master" of finance and business in a game that manifestly has only one winner (the "Master" himself), one favoured slave (the "Apprentice"), and no human values. (It would seem to promote fascism if it were not so evidently false.) The popularity of this show among working-class viewers (a group so denatured that they no longer see themselves as workers, but only as consumers, and increasingly as consumers of nothing but images) suggests that it offers them an imaginary form of role reversal. They can, via TV, consider themselves as could-be plutocrats, the winners in life based on *Monopoly* or *Bingo* or the lottery. The American working class, having lost their manufacturing jobs and the middle-class lifestyle of the 1950s through the 1970s to globalization (or, more recently, having lost their homes to the greed of the banks)—that is, having personally experienced the process of "downsizing"—may, as viewers of the show, imagine that they are able to take control of the situation. Viewers thus identify with the "Master" and his chosen "Apprentice" (such mythic names!), but they are more accurately represented by the losers. This format made the show appealing as an imaginary mastering of finance, a fantasy power trip. I take this show to be a very symbolic part of the spectacle, a deep symbol, emblematic of the dangers of the image.

Trump continued to perform the role of the "Master" during his presidential campaign, transforming himself into an imaginary commodity

with little of the human remaining. The chances for such a person to use violence as an instrument of government without much thought are great. Terry Eagleton, analyzing Marxism, believes that “power as sheer display” will inevitably be expressed excessively.⁵ In what will be the “peacock presidency” of a true chicken hawk, all “stomp, stomp, stomp’...[going] nowhere in particular,” this will most likely be the case with Trump. Ideas are all we have between the annihilation of our species and more relative but equally immoral violence, such as drone warfare. There is a lot of thinking about how those moving figures on the screen disable the normal unwillingness to kill anonymous others for purely ideological reasons.⁶ It is an intellectual form of murder, and so better-suited to Obama than Trump. When Trump urged his supporters to “beat the crap out of” protesters at a political rally, he embodied the perfect image of the chicken hawk, much more pure and abstracted than George W. Bush’s rendition. Bush at least pretended to take part in the Texas Air National Guard during Vietnam. Trump is someone who obviously never had to fight in his life. He is the essence of the chicken hawk without any tinge of truth about the pose. And none of his supporters seem to care.

At some point the image took over American politics or the voter just stopped interpreting the image and simply accepted it as presented, as advertised. Reagan’s Teflon presidency thus gave way to the wimp oilman/Saudi front man to Slick Willy to the faux Texan, son of the Saudi front man, the chicken hawk who tried to sell himself as a jet pilot (Americans did not appear to see the irony in that either). Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, LBJ—all were largely images, yet their images were interpreted. In contemporary American politics, however, it appears that voters know there is nothing behind the image, so they resign themselves to taking part in a purely imaginary and impotent game of images.

Trump is thus part of an information system based on films, video games, and television shows. There have been movie star and wrestler politicians, but Trump is the first candidate to come out of “Reality TV,” and he is a master at making the obviously staged seem real and the obviously oppressive seem liberating. He is not a preacher who actually offers something (salvation, success, forgiveness, etc.), but rather one who sells the audience nothing except their own degradation. Put another way, Trump is a purveyor of commodities in their most abstracted, alienated form, and his commodities are anger, fear, ego, bluster, and bullshit. This is possible due to the hypnotic nature of the spectacle, which obscures the difference between reality and image and eliminates any distinction between right and wrong.

Notes

1. Jonathan Franzen, "The End of the End of the World," *The New Yorker* (May 23, 2016): 44-55.
2. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995).
3. Jane Mayer, "Trump's Boswell Speaks," *The New Yorker* (July 25, 2016): 22-23.
4. Marjorie Cohn, "The Content of Trump's Character," *Z Magazine* (September 2016): 12.
5. Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 208-210.
6. For a description of the dehumanizing processes that circumvent intrinsic human values for this individualized enjoyment of the right to hunt and kill other human beings from a robot eye in the sky, see Grégoire Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: New Press, 2015).