

comment

TRUMP AND THE DEATH OF THE IMAGE

a comment on Arjun Appadurai (this issue)

This is a sharp and provocative intervention in the American culture of the 'image' as connected to the rise of mass media and commercialization, and extended to the realm of political culture. The latter has become dependent on the work of spin doctors, media advisers and communication strategists. In sum, it is the result of a complex and well-oiled machinery that puts the spotlight on the political leader, i.e. POTUS, as the end product of savvy media campaigns and micromanaged image-making.

Trump seems to have said goodbye to all of that, as this guest editorial brilliantly points out. It is spot on in singling out Trump as the narcissist without sleekness, an uncouth and openly vulgar President who not only eschews any principles of diplomacy, etiquette and political correctness but also ignores his best advisers by non-filtering, non-editing or non-styling his utterances and appearances. Yet this conclusion could seem counterintuitive given his writing off of \$70,000 for 'Hairstyling' in his tax returns and his megalomaniac obsession with visibility and self-aggrandizement.

This form of apparently 'unmediated' presence serves, in fact, to centre the eye of the beholder exclusively on him, and nothing but him. He is the focus of the perspective in each setting and framing, and his unfiltered and unpolished appearances are meant to convey authenticity, truth and authority. No need for staff, support and backstage operations. He is the only one in the spotlight of what seems like a truly bad TV reality show. As John Berger stated in his *Ways of seeing* (1972), images speak louder than words, and the rise of Donald Trump and the list of right-wingers (Putin, Bolsonaro, Johnson, Orbán and Salvini, for example) suggests a much grimmer conclusion than anyone anticipated.

This is of course not unlike authoritarian propaganda machinery and visual techniques used in the past. Trump's approach has been often compared to the fascist rhetoric used by former dictators, and his leadership style is reminiscent of Benito Mussolini, who astutely manipulated new media technologies, such as newsreels and cinema, to reach out to the masses directly while proclaiming that 'cinema is the strongest weapon'. Ruth Ben Ghiat comments in her latest book *Strongmen: Mussolini to the present* upon the parallels in image-making and leadership style between Mussolini and Trump, who both present themselves as 'strongmen', and, therefore, as over-the-top examples of masculinity, virile and invincible. Even during his short bout of Covid-19, Trump made sure that he stayed in the picture, however dishevelled, and showed that he had nothing to fear and that he had overcome this challenge as a *deus ex machina*.

It is no coincidence that Twitter, his preferred social media platform and public form of self-broadcasting (he joined in 2009), is best suited to his need to communicate directly to his fan base, which at the time of writing stands at 87 million followers. Twitter, as the least 'image'-oriented of all the current dominant social media platforms (compared with Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, for example, which were mentioned in the opinion piece), allows the user to dominate, manipulate and steer public debate through retweets as a form of endorsement and hashtags to guarantee trending, without much in the way of control or consequences. Twitter's attempts to block Trump's factually incorrect and violent content have been met with an irate response by the President, who threatened to shut down his preferred social media platform in revenge. If that were to happen, it would be the complete death of the image for Mr Trump. ●

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TRUMP'S TRUTH

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It has become commonplace to argue that Trump represents a perverse return to authenticity in public life, even if only in the liberty to give offence. The brilliance of Appadurai's analysis is to take such arguments in a new direction by linking the contempt for hypocrisy, political correctness and other alleged examples of dishonesty or bad faith to the repudiation of society itself. He does so by making the case that Trump is the first American President who is unconcerned with presenting an image of himself to the public. By refusing even the possibility of a gap between his person and persona, he rejects the third-party character, the 'they', that defines society through the image's normative power.

While Trump might indeed represent the death of the image as a vector of the social, the pleasure of liberation from its mediation can only occur by repeatedly reinstating it in the form of the social 'they' who must be mocked and defeated. Could the crisis of the image in contemporary America, then, turn not on its power but on its enfeeblement, which Trump recognizes and attacks as he always has the vulnerable? Indeed, his attacks have the paradoxical role of propping up a failing form in order to safely enact the pleasure of liberation from it as a typical piece of Trumpian theatre. The conservative or, rather, reactionary aspect of his politics becomes evident here, as it does in his promotion of big capital or executive force.

Does this fake radicalism explain why only Trump is allowed to disdain the image and not his associates? Only he must have an unmediated connection with his support base, who

together represent the 'me' and 'you' divested of a social 'they'. Trump's honesty has to be rule-breaking and even criminal by a logic that goes beyond his personality. This is why all the accusations levelled at him, from fraud and tax evasion to misogyny and worse, end up working for him. And yet, because these traits can never themselves be transmuted into social truth or acceptability, they remain eccentric and are unable to replicate themselves and become the foundation for a new order. This is not a story about the re-emergence of fascism or totalitarianism.

Militias like Proud Boys or conspiracies like QAnon reject Trump's efforts to close the gap between his person and persona. Both see him as possessing some secret message concealed behind a buffoonish image. His excesses serve as mortifications of the kind familiar to his Christian supporters. What Trump's opponents see as dog-whistle politics, in other words, become sacrificial acts for his supporters, both parties otherwise agreeing on a view of presidential profundity that tries to find old-fashioned reason in his antics. This attempt to return to the logic of the image by a via negativa does nothing but demonstrate its crisis. Even here the 'they' from whose conventionality liberation is sought fails to materialize.

The social 'they' must be found in a changing list of enemies, from Muslims, Mexicans and migrants more generally to liberals and socialists. Each represents an image whose weakness is compensated for by another. Just as Trump doesn't represent the kind of authenticity which emerged in the nineteenth century to break through the crust of convention with its deeper truth, his supporters' efforts at racism or fascism are pale revivals of a past to which they have no real access. This does not mitigate their violence and might even explain it as self-justification. But it confirms Appadurai's argument that abolishing the image leaves behind a void that can only be filled by more images. ●

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VENEZUELAN CRISIS

a reply to Eva van Roekel & Marjo de Theije, AT 36(2)

The article by Eva van Roekel and Marjo de Theije enriches the analysis of the Venezuelan crisis. It also makes a good case for the development of critical perspectives on the study of scenarios of crisis, illuminating contradictory (and partly complementary) experiences of abundance and scarcity in two different border regions. An ethnographically grounded 'anthropology of abundance' (to use the denomination the authors give to their analytical proposal) could provide valuable insights into the mechanisms that enable accumulation