

2 Compelling Images

Images to change the world

In 1890, Danish-American police reporter Jacob Riis published *How the Other Half Lives*, an exposé of New York City tenement life. This early example of muckraking journalism relied on photographs, drawings and graphic descriptions to reveal the appalling living conditions among immigrants vulnerable to wealthy tenement owners. New photographic flash technology using magnesium powder allowed Riis to illuminate the dark recesses of slum living conditions, often revealing images of children in squalid surroundings. While his reporting was designed to ‘speak directly to people’s hearts’ (Pascal 2005: 87), he was convinced that disclosing the facts would lead to outrage and subsequent improvements. His photographs were not without artistry, but Riis intended to document the stark black and white reality of how the other half lives.

Fast-forward to 2011: Parisian street artist JR accepts a prestigious TED Prize for his large-scale wide-angle portraits pasted up on buildings, trains and bridges. An early JR project featured portraits of hoodlums displayed in middle-class Parisian neighbourhoods. *Face 2 Face* paired portraits of Palestinians and Israelis in similar lines of work. Many of the large-scale images were pasted onto the separation barrier dividing the two nations. With *Women are Heroes* (2008–9), JR and local collaborators covered walls of Brazilian *favelas* and roofs and trains in Kenya with giant images of women printed on waterproof vinyl. In his presentation to the TED audience, JR explained that his photographic projects attempt to build bridges between people and media. He expressed the hope that art can change the way we see the world and thus, perhaps, change the world (JR’s TED Prize 2011).

In this chapter, we look at the persuasive power of images: their ability to reveal their version of the truth and their ability to deceive.

Two allegories: the Cave and the Matrix

Picture this: you and everyone you know are prisoners in a large cave, chained hand and foot to chairs, facing forward. From somewhere behind you, a light source casts shadows onto the wall in front of you. You are surrounded by sound and the flickering shadows mesmerise you.

Eventually, you are released from the chains restraining you and allowed to look around. You see that the images on the cavern wall are created by forms paraded before the light source. You are then guided up a set of stairs to an outer world lit by the sun. At first, the light is blinding, but you soon adjust to its brightness and begin to see an unfamiliar natural world. When you return to the dark cavern, you reveal to the other prisoners that they are looking at phantasms, a collective hallucination. These images, you report, are shadows of real forms passing in front of the light. 'Life as we are seeing it', you announce, 'is a spectacle of shadows. Real life is elsewhere'.

This story should sound familiar. Plato has Socrates tell a version of it in Chapter VII of *The Republic*, and it has come down to us as the 'Allegory of the Cave'. The story should also be familiar because it expresses what we hear in contemporary society about the mass media's power to substitute images for reality. We do not see actual conflict in a foreign country; we see selected images of that conflict on our various screens. The popular film *The Matrix* (1999) and its sequels have a similar theme: images can be deceptive, so you should distrust appearances of reality. Neo, the neophyte, with his guides Morpheus and Trinity, must find his way through the illusions of the Matrix into the light of understanding and truth. The Matrix is a façade of simulations constructed to hide the reality that machines are now controlling humans and feeding off their life energies. At one point during Neo's period of disillusionment, Morpheus offers him a choice between taking a red pill or a blue pill. If he chooses the red pill, he begins a heroic journey toward understanding; but if he chooses the blue pill, he remains enslaved to the Matrix.

Both tales suggest we need guides such as Socrates or Morpheus to help discern what is real, what is ideal and what is false in a world of illusions and both reflect a suspicion of the spectacle's power to deceive.

Iconoclasm and image power

Icons (Greek *eikōn*, 'image') were originally small paintings of Christian divine beings. The term 'icon' came to refer more broadly to images or objects that gain power from what they represent. In contemporary culture it describes well-known people and significant objects: a celeb-

rity, symbolic building, influential design or brand. As icons ‘borrow’ power from the thing represented, they have a controversial history.

When I travelled through Turkey in the mid-1990s, I saw many examples of Christian iconic portraits where the eyes of saints and divinities had been scratched out by followers of Islam. These faithful vandals were expressing their belief that spiritual beings should not be illustrated by human hands, a convention known as aniconism. Prohibitions against images of the divine are found in many religious texts, including the Hebrew Old Testament (Second Commandment, Exodus 20: 4–6) and the Islamic Qur’an (5: 87–92; 21: 51–2). Judeo-Christian doctrine asserts that humans were created in the ‘image and likeness’ of God, and this jealous God prohibited the worship of graven idols. Similarly, Islamic aniconism prohibits the ‘representation of living creatures because humans might create images to be used as idols’ (Meggs 1998: 53). Fear of idolatry was partly a reaction to polytheistic fetishes and totems and is ironic when we consider that monotheism replaced one system of idols for another.

Mitchell (1986) cites many examples of iconoclasts defaming the icons and fetishes of an opposing group, only to assert the purity of their own icons. There was a battle over Christian images in eighth- and ninth-century Byzantium between iconoclasts and those iconophiles who believed religious icons, sacred objects and sumptuous decorations should be permitted. Later, Protestants destroyed Catholic icons during the Reformation, as did French and Russian revolutionaries in their time. In British Columbia, the colonial government of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries prohibited the First Nations potlatch and confiscated its spiritual regalia. Christian churches with steeples, crosses and altars replaced the potlatch ceremonies, where extravagant gift giving established status and bound tribes together in a network of obligation. Iconoclasm of this sort is ancient, ‘grounded in an ideology that supports the inferiority of ethnic minority peoples and has served to justify policies and practices of assimilation, ethnocide and genocide’ (Alia and Bull 2005: 3).

More recently, Soviet revisionists destroyed statues of Stalin after 1956 to discredit his leadership. Chinese communists destroyed Tibetan monasteries and artwork during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and forced its spiritual leaders into exile (Dhardhowa 2011). Islamic Taliban destroyed monumental Buddhist statues at Bamiyan in Afghanistan in 1991. US soldiers and Iraqi mercenaries toppled Saddam Hussein’s statue after the fall of Baghdad in 2003 (Paxman 2010; Maass 2011). In 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published twelve cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad to raise

issues concerning criticism of Islam and self-censorship in the media. Publication of the images ignited a firestorm of protest in Muslim countries and resulted in many deaths. Yale University Press refused to include the controversial images in Klausen's *The Cartoons That Shook the World* (2009) and defended its decision by claiming that they did not want to incite further protests and possible deaths (Cohen 2009). In January 2015, two armed men broke into the Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo* magazine and killed twelve people for publishing cartoons satirical of Islam, reigniting volatile international debates about freedom of expression, the limits of satire, and religious tolerance.

The symbolic power of images can be turned, through their destruction, into equally powerful examples of propaganda. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 epitomise iconoclasm in the early twenty-first century. In an interview conducted on 21 October 2001, Osama bin Laden identified the iconic significance of the 9/11 targets: 'These young men . . . have shifted the battle to the heart of the United States, and they have destroyed its most outstanding landmarks, its economic and military landmarks, by the grace of God' (bin Laden 2005: 107).

War is waged with weapons and images. On 21 March 2003, the US launched an aerial attack on Baghdad in a campaign the US military and media called 'Shock and Awe'. As reported in the British press, 'the appalling "Shock n' Awe Show" . . . resembled something that might have been conceived by a big-budget Hollywood director' (Whitaker 2003: n.p.). The bombing of Baghdad – a city founded in the eighth century as a centre for Islamic culture – was a propaganda spectacle staged for prime time television. Not even the satirical film *Wag the Dog* (1997) – in which a Hollywood producer and a publicist stage a fake war in the media to save a presidency – anticipated Shock and Awe's cynical iconoclasm.

Images, perspective and control

The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. (Berger 1972: 7)

We see before we understand, giving images persuasive power beyond reason's reach. Spectacles like the September 11 attacks or the 'Shock and Awe' campaign send powerful visual messages before audiences understand their significance. Our defence against disturbing images comes after the fact. Western news sources generally do not show the bodies of the dead and wounded without explicit warning, because

they are considered too inflammatory. They disturb viewers' emotional equilibrium and undermine motivation for war. Instead, we see soldiers carrying flag-draped coffins to the waiting cargo plane. The 'ramp ceremony' ritual presents an iconic image with an embedded narrative – one of propaganda's most potent instruments, because it merges seen and unseen into an emotional instant.

In cultures where images proliferate, repeat and circulate in the flow of commerce and promotion, it is notable that culturally important images are often censored, hidden away in unseen archives or too costly to be reproduced. Those owing the important images of a culture – including their means of reproduction and circulation – control, to a large extent, how the past is perceived. For example, in late 2013, US judges were still deliberating on the release of images showing the assassination of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 by US Navy SEALs, even though a film of the same event (*Zero Dark Thirty*) had been nominated for an Academy Award (Levs and Cratty 2013). US Government lawyers argued that images of bin Laden, shot in the head and buried at sea, would be used for propaganda and incite violence against America.

Images can move us deeply and beyond our comprehension. Mysterious images take on the power of fetish or talisman, obsessing viewers. Bataille's exploration of eroticism, terror and death in *The Tears of Eros* (1961) includes a series of images showing the public execution of a Chinese criminal, still alive, being cut to pieces. The victim's eyes gaze skyward and convey inexpressible emotion. Bataille owned one of these images and writes: 'This photograph had a decisive role in my life. I have never stopped being obsessed by this image of pain, at once ecstatic (?) and intolerable' ([1961] 1989: 206). Seeing can become voyeuristic and obsessive, especially when images break taboos.

In *Iconology* (1986), Mitchell attempts to rescue images from being measured unfairly against spoken and written language. He wants to challenge an influential discourse by critics such as Benjamin (1936), Sontag (1977) and Barthes (1978) warning about the persuasive power of images. For these critics, images are not merely a 'transparent window on the world', but present the appearance of naturalness masking unseen distortions (Mitchell [1986] 1987: 8). Neuroscience confirms that image perception is not a straightforward recording of what we see, but a translation and re-creation. The brain 'does not recreate the original image', observes Ramachandran, 'but represents the various features and aspects of the image in totally new terms' ([2011] 2012: 47). Visual perception 'involves judgement and interpretation', an 'opinion of the world rather than a passive reaction to sensory input' (49). But Mitchell also wants images to be assessed fairly against language.

Images can be misleading, but they also communicate in ways language cannot. Over the centuries, philosophers and critics constructed hierarchies between images and words: images were thought to be more primitive than language and writing and, thus, inferior; images came to be associated with nature, and language with culture; images depict sensation and experience, while writing reveals unseen worlds and appeals to intellect, instead of emotion. In cultures seeking to dominate and control nature, writing announced the triumph of culture over nature. From this perspective, language ‘signifies spiritual, mental things, in contrast to images which can only represent material objects; [language] is capable of articulating complex ideas, stating propositions, telling lies, expressing logical relations, whereas images can only show us something in mute display’ (Mitchell [1986] 1987: 78). Seeking equal status for images and words, Mitchell disputes this false dichotomy: ‘The mistake is to think we can know the truth about things by knowing the right names, signs, or representations of them’ (92).

Images gained credibility in the contest against language when Alberti formulated conventions of visual perspective in 1425. Perspective added scientific information and verisimilitude (lifelikeness) to images and convinced ‘an entire civilisation that it possessed an infallible method of representation, a system for the automatic and mechanical production of truths about the material and mental worlds’ (Mitchell [1986] 1987: 39). British painter David Hockney (2006) shows that in the early fifteenth century, optics (mirrors and lenses) helped artists structure their compositions more scientifically, with greater precision and detail. Single-point perspective positions the viewer in relation to a vanishing point, where all lines converge on a distant horizon. Perspective thus controls the way we view images and influences what we look at. Through their control of perspective, monumental architecture, urban design and places of worship inspire awe by organising space and positioning viewers in relation to symbols of power.

Perspective is both persuasive and ideological, and the still camera, followed by film and television cameras, inherited perspective’s ability to position viewers. Camera technology imposes a particular vantage point determined by perspective and framing. While not strictly forced to adopt these limitations, viewers must make conscious efforts to imagine the physical scene from a different perspective or outside the bounding frame. The controlling frame and point of view also instruct audiences in visual pleasure by showing compelling images. Film critic Laura Mulvey states that film, and especially Hollywood film, manipulates ‘visual pleasure’ by encoding ‘the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order’ (1975: 8). The camera frames

what is considered erotic – a hegemonic construct – but frequently misses the mark.

The early twentieth century brought new approaches to perspective. Cubism, Dada, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism abandoned conventional perspective to reflect developments in philosophy, biology, physics and psychology, which collectively displaced individual viewers from their former, fixed position. Collage and montage superimpose multiple perspectives and diverse materials to communicate the ‘discontinuous and ruptured’ nature of the modern age (Teitelbaum and Freiman 1992: 7). Audiences learned new ways of seeing uncertainty, diversity and difference, as well as their polar opposites: certainty and uniformity.

Aura and the aesthetics of politics

In September 1940, on the border between France and Spain, German cultural critic Walter Benjamin took his life after Spanish authorities cancelled his travel visa. German forces were overtaking Paris, and Benjamin was trying to escape to the United States. As a Jewish intellectual, communist sympathiser and critic of the Nazi regime, he faced certain extradition to Germany (Arendt 1968: 18). Benjamin was associated with the Frankfurt School of cultural criticism, particularly with his friend Max Horkheimer, who had published Benjamin’s influential essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ in 1936. Benjamin’s essay continues to be widely cited for its provocative insights into art, media and politics and particularly for its inquiry into what makes visual images compelling. As he famously concludes in this essay: ‘The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life’ ([1936] 1968: 241).

Benjamin is most concerned with the impact of photography, its evolution into film and their combined role influencing mass audiences during periods of political turmoil, revolution and war. He was especially troubled by the use of reproduced images in the totalitarian spectacles he witnessed in 1930s Germany. While artworks have always been reproducible by copying, Benjamin argues that mechanical reproduction introduces changes of scale, quality and distribution that redefine art’s audience and value. For example, the eighteenth century invention of lithography brought illustration into the regime of mechanical reproduction and set the stage for wider image distribution using the rotary and offset press after 1850.

Reproduction creates an independent copy by adding levels of control: lighting, colour management, enlargement, cropping, camera

angle, editing and juxtaposition to other images. The image becomes available in places where the original could not be seen: a painting reproduced in a magazine or art book or a photograph reproduced in the popular press. Benjamin claims mechanical reproduction diminishes the original artwork, as 'for instance, for a landscape which passes in review before the spectator in a movie' ([1936] 1968: 221). The original possesses direct material evidence of its creation, which gives it an 'aura' derived from its presence, authenticity (history) and authority. Benjamin's notion of 'aura' is related to the idea that the iconic image borrows from the spirit and power of the thing it represents. Mander (1978) includes this notion of depreciation as one of his arguments for the elimination of television. Manufactured objects display with greater vividness on television, while nature is stripped of its scope and grandeur, diminished by the screen's confining frame.

Benjamin was interested in Jewish mysticism and coined the term 'auratic perception' to describe a culture's renewed appreciation of myth. Regrettably for Benjamin, a profane 'cult of beauty' was replacing sacred myth and ritual in Nazi Germany ([1936] 1968: 224). Politics tried to appropriate the aura and ritual of original art, but instead converted it to kitsch – a vulgar and sentimental reproduction. Fascism turned politics into kitsch and drove Benjamin towards exile and despair.

Branding totalitarianism

Twenty years before Madison Avenue embarked upon 'Motivational Research', Hitler was systematically exploring and exploiting the secret fears and hopes, the cravings, anxieties and frustrations of the German masses. (Huxley [1958] 1965: 43)

Steven Heller (2008) brings his expertise in advertising and graphic design to bear on the visual culture of four twentieth-century totalitarian regimes: Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Soviet Russia and Communist China. He begins with a bold claim: 'Starting in the twentieth century, totalitarian states began using the same graphic identity techniques as modern industries and corporations'. Heller asserts that '[d]espots and businessmen alike strove to establish branding narratives . . . used to trigger instantaneous recognition of their ideas and products' (8). Ads are designed 'to infiltrate the subconscious in order to trigger conformist behaviour . . . to capture the loyalty of a targeted, and hopefully malleable, demographic'. For corporate and totalitarian branding alike, Heller concludes: 'If this requires engaging in some ruse or creating a fallacy, then ruse and fallacy it is' (8).

As producers of political aesthetics, the four totalitarian states under review created ‘powerful visual narratives’ designed for instant recognition using logos: swastika, bundle of fasces (*fascio*), hammer and sickle and the Chinese star. Leaders became the recognisable face of the movement similar to ‘trade characters’, such as Bibendum (Michelin Man), Mr Clean and Ronald McDonald. Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin and Mao are iconic figures who embody their movements’ core narratives. As Heller comments: ‘Each totalitarian brand story was designed both to enrage and engage the populace’ (9). From monumental architecture to everyday objects stamped with symbols, the regime’s presence – and influence – is constantly paraded before the people. Public gatherings, uniforms, statues, images of leaders and party news in the media encourage brand loyalty. As usual, repetition brings recognition and acceptance.

Heller says that ‘[e]xplaining the visual language and branding strategies of these totalitarian regimes is essential to an understanding of how they developed, communicated, and perpetuated their core ideologies through word, picture, and design’ (11). Visual propaganda and branding must appeal to a broad range of tastes, so their visual style is not high or elitist. Stalin thought the Russian Revolution’s Constructivist style was too avant-garde for the masses and insisted on Socialist Realism instead. Similarly, the Nazis condemned what they called ‘degenerate’ art movements, such as Expressionism and Fauvism, and instead enforced their own style of idealised realism (Clark 1997). Above all, the goal of the totalitarian state is to dominate the public display of images, from the mundane to the grandiose. Totalitarian states stage-manage their brand identities carefully, including the circulation of photographs and films documenting their activities. Image control is especially important when totalitarian regimes inflict pain.

‘Psychic numbing’: regarding the pain of others

[P]hotographs of the victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus. (Sontag 2003: 6)

Susan Sontag writes that ‘a society becomes “modern” when one of its chief activities is producing and consuming images’ (1977: 153). She recognises the power of photographs to convey complex messages, but expresses reservations about the ethics of spectatorship and voyeurism. Overexposure to images of pain can lead to ‘psychic numbing’: withdrawal of attention from traumatic experiences and future threats, equally affecting individuals and whole societies (Lifton

1982). Photojournalist Susan Moeller writes about ‘compassion fatigue’ resulting from overexposure to traumatic images (1999, 2001), and Stanley Cohen (2001) investigates the ‘states of denial’ that follow exposure to disturbing images and news reports.

Photographs and films intended to bring awareness to social issues can have the opposite effect by inducing viewers to dissociate from images of suffering (Phan et al. 2003). ‘The quality of feeling, including moral outrage, that people can muster in response to photographs of the oppressed, the exploited, the starving, and the massacred also depends on the degree of their familiarity with those images’ (Sontag 1977: 19). Images of refugee children lose their impact, she says, because we have seen them too often. ‘Photographs shock insofar as they show something novel. Unfortunately, the ante keeps getting raised – partly through the very proliferation of such images of horror’ (19).

Case study: Abu Ghraib exposed

We also have to work, though, sort of the dark side, if you will. We’ve got to spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world . . . That’s the world these folks operate in, and so it’s going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal, basically, to achieve our objective. (Vice-President Cheney talking to NBC’s Tim Russert on 16 September 2001; Froomkin 2005)

In early 2004, disturbing images and reports began emerging in the US media. They told a story of torture and degradation of Iraqi prisoners by the American military and CIA operatives in Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad. The investigation began when Corporal Charles Graner – a main actor in the abuse allegations – circulated a compact disc of photographs taken in the prison (Hersh 2004). The images showed naked prisoners chained to beds and railings, men heaped in piles, dragged by ropes across the floor, forced into compromising sexual positions, threatened by snarling dogs, covered in excrement, hung from the ceiling, wired for electroshock, beaten, bloody, wounded, unconscious and dead. The shocking images provoked immediate international outrage, though the American media was slow to respond to the report written by General Antonio Taguba and released to *The New Yorker*. Taguba concluded that there were ‘egregious acts and grave breaches of international law’, where ‘key senior leaders . . . failed to comply with established regulations, policies, and command directives in preventing detainee abuses’ (Taguba 2004: n.p.).

A year later, eleven people had been charged with dereliction of duty,

maltreatment and aggravated assault and battery. Two of them were sentenced to prison time. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld accepted responsibility with the following wording: ‘These events occurred on my watch . . . It is my obligation to evaluate what happened, to make sure those who have committed wrongdoing are brought to justice’ (Rumsfeld 2004: n.p.). Rumsfeld’s phrase ‘obligation to evaluate’ is equivocal: as Morris (2011) and others note, those ultimately responsible for the order to torture were not ‘brought to justice’. *The Economist*, which had supported the Bush administration in the 2000 election, ran a May 2004 cover that blared ‘Resign, Rumsfeld’ and featured the low-resolution image of a hooded Iraqi prisoner standing on a cardboard box with electric wires attached to his outstretched arms and genitals. By December 2004, the American Civil Liberties Union released evidence that President Bush, by Executive Order, had mandated torture.

Unlike images of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, reproduction and display of the Abu Ghraib images in US mainstream media was subdued and strategic, many sources citing their inflammatory and disturbing nature (Sontag 2004). Editors at Salon.com commented: ‘Abu Ghraib in fall 2003 may have been its own particular hell, but the variations of individual abuse perpetrated appear to be exceptional in only one way: They were photographed and filmed’ (Abu Ghraib 2006: n.p.). Sontag notes the unusual inclusion of the ‘perpetrators’ in many of the photographs and compares this with photographs of lynching, ‘which show Americans grinning beneath the naked mutilated body of a black man or woman hanging behind them from a tree’. These photographs are ‘souvenirs of a collective action whose participants felt perfectly justified in what they had done’ (2004: n.p.).

Warning: Explicit Images

To view images and videos of Abu Ghraib go to:

Abu Ghraib Torture and Prisoner Abuse, *Wikipedia*:
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Ghraib_torture_and_prisoner_abuse

The Abu Ghraib Files, *Salon*:
www.salon.com/topic/the_abu_ghraib_files/

While it is tempting to read these images as evidence of a nation having lost its moral compass, there is another possibility: the thumbs-up gesture recorded in photographs of Sabrina Harman, Lynndie England, Charles Graner and other military personnel signals that the

US is accomplishing what it set out to do after 9/11. These people are following orders, getting the job done and making a record for their superiors.

Linfield thinks the photographs of Abu Ghraib ‘not only depict cruelty but celebrate it’ (2010: 151). They may be ‘the most widely circulated photographs ever made’, appearing in newspapers, magazines, websites, on television, on walls around the world and ‘on gravestones in Gaza City, where they are accompanied by the promise, “We Will Revenge”’ (151–2). As propaganda images, they have been used to recruit terrorists and raise funds for human rights groups. They have ‘inspired a global conversation’ (152) in a call-and-response of disturbing images of airplanes flying into buildings, public beheadings, torture and imprisonment, suicide bombings, civilian casualties, protests and flag burning – all photographed and filmed to communicate ‘mutual loathing and mutual fear’ (152–3).

Linfield quotes Sontag’s argument that the Abu Ghraib images reveal the ‘confluence of torture and pornography’ and are thus voyeuristic and deceptive (Sontag 2004; Linfield 2010: 154). Sontag is sceptical that photographs can tell the whole story without accompanying text. The images may be striking and expressive, but they can also be misleading and ambiguous. Writer and filmmaker Errol Morris shares Sontag’s concern and made it the central theme of his film *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008, with Mike Gourevitch) and his book *Believing is Seeing* (2011). Morris observes that photographs ‘attract false beliefs the way flypaper attracts flies’ (2011: 92) and recommends that captions are important for clarifying the subject of controversial images. Linfield challenges this argument:

The Abu Ghraib images shocked the public, and scared the government, precisely *because* they were photographs; they could not be spun, denied, or explained away, and though they could be interpreted in various ways, they could not be made to mean anything at all . . . The Abu Ghraib images – digital images, taken by amateurs – have strengthened, not undermined the status of photographs as documents of the real. No written account of the tortures could have made such an impact. (2010: 160)

The US administration crafted the narrative that Abu Ghraib was an anomaly perpetrated by improperly briefed ‘bad apples’. Subsequent WikiLeaks documents revealed that prisoner abuse was not isolated to Abu Ghraib and continued after the scandal (Baram 2010). While efforts to script the narrative, cast doubt and redirect blame continue, the Abu Ghraib images are now indelible examples of terror’s spectacle.

The terrorism spectacle creates fertile ground for propaganda on all sides and elevates security threats to a national priority. In response to prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, Al-Qaeda members beheaded American contractor Nicholas Berg in 2004. They captured the killing on videotape and distributed it globally (Zarqawi 2004; Linfield 2010: 155–6). New channels of image distribution allow disturbing images to bypass the usual gatekeepers and circulate more freely. Now, ‘any analysis of public space must take into account the effects, speed, rhythms of information and communication, real-time images, differential modes of control, and unprecedented power increasingly deployed by the new media’ (Giroux 2006: 40). The consequences are significant, since governments use the threat of terrorism to justify state surveillance, crowd control and rights removal. In his film *The Power of Nightmares* (2004), Adam Curtis argues that politicians on all sides use the spectacle of terrorism to provoke fear and win elections.

A century of spectacle

The idea that contemporary society is notable for its delusional spectacles is now a commonplace of cultural criticism (Baudrillard 1988, 2005; Eco 1986; Giroux 2006; Hedges 2009). Greil Marcus (1989) traces the origins of this notion to an international movement of social revolutionaries organised around a small group of Paris-based intellectuals. Led by Guy Debord and known as the Situationist International, these cultural tricksters emerged in the late 1950s from the Lettrist International – a group of libertarian artists and writers inspired by Surrealism, Dada and Marx. The Situationist agenda was part revolutionary social transformation, part anti-bourgeois art movement, simultaneously serious and playful. Situationist tricks included the *dérive* (unpremeditated drifting through city streets looking for signs of interest) and the *détournement* (appropriation of images and artefacts for other purposes). Graffiti and other forms of street art combine both forms of Situationist play.

Debord’s 1967 manifesto *Society of the Spectacle* remains an influential critique of manipulative spectacle in Western societies. Debord argues that the ‘accumulation of spectacles’ ([1967] 1983: para. 1) in the twentieth century does not merely result from proliferating mass media, but is continuously produced to promote capitalism and its values. The spectacle ‘presents itself as an instrument of unification’ working through social relations ‘mediated by images’ (para. 4). It contributes to the ‘existing order’s uninterrupted discourse about itself, its laudatory monologue’ (para. 24) and encourages ‘having’ over ‘being’ in its promotion of commodities. The spectacle justifies elite

priorities, whether posing as information or propaganda, advertising or entertainment. It colonises the public sphere with its messages and, even more significantly, infiltrates the lifeworld by promoting commodities that engage identity issues and confer status. The system mystifies both commodity and spectacle to maintain power, a trick it learned from ancient religious rituals: 'The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion', writes Debord (para. 20).

In this view, religion exploits uncertainties about creation, morality and the afterlife, offering absolute certainty for believers and replacing former idols with new icons of the divine. Similarly, materialist ideologies such as capitalism and socialism address uncertainties about security and happiness with schemes of production, social organisation and means of governance. The contemporary spectacle absorbs and transforms the uncertainties of philosophy, religion and social organisation and converts them into power. 'The oldest social specialisation, the specialisation of power, is at the root of the spectacle . . . Here the most modern is the most archaic' (para. 23). Debord and his colleagues were deeply troubled by the 'archaic' fascist spectacle.

Following Debord's lead, Baudrillard (1988) criticised the increasing power of 'simulations' to create an artificial space for social action he called the 'simulacrum' – a Matrix-like reality defined by simulations. Baudrillard uses the analogy of a map drawn before the territory has been discovered to argue that simulations 'precede' a 'reality' that does not yet exist: the image 'bears no relation to any reality whatever; it is its own pure simulacrum' (1988: 170). Television news broadcasts use state-of-the-art technology – from high definition cameras to Skype and 'amateur' videos – to convey the heightened realism of their visual reporting. Does the television newscast provide a window to the world or does it assemble a simulation of the day's events? Pseudo-events, such as press conferences, leadership debates and photo opportunities, are staged solely to be reported in the media and make every effort to be convincing illusions (Boorstin 1961).

Umberto Eco's related concept of hyperreality announces the triumph of the absolute fake, epitomised by Las Vegas, Disneyland and other fantasies of all-absorbing illusion (1986). The art style called hyperrealism tries to convince viewers that what they are seeing is minutely faithful to reality, even though it is obviously recreated (Bredenkamp 2006). Image manipulation programs such as Photoshop put photographic evidence in doubt; visual beauty is now routinely the result of 'Photoshopping'. High-definition (HD) formats in photography, television and film exploit the aesthetics of hyperrealism to create all-absorbing spectacles of illusion.

The public spectacle

The photographic image and mass spectacle can deceive and distract us, but this is a cautionary tale and not the end of the story. Cultural critics have an understandable aversion to totalitarian spectacles, but a blanket condemnation of the mass experience denies the necessity of ancient and sustaining practices of collective renewal. In *Spectacle* (2006), Rockwell and Mau celebrate the other spectacle: not the ideological spectacle of fascism, totalitarianism, socialism or capitalism, but the spectacle of humanity's universal need to gather, celebrate and worship. They approach spectacle not as cultural critics, but as designers and architects of public spaces.

An empty stadium, an open field or a busy urban thoroughfare – each one a public space – undergoes an alchemical process when transformed by spectacle. A group of strangers fuses into an instant community . . . [Y]ou become part of something greater than yourself. (2006: 15)

Rockwell and Mau present the playful, invigorating face of spectacle, arguing that human spectacles connect, immerse and transform their participants. Spectacles are for everyone, rich and poor, young and old. They happen in real time and, like theatre, involve living bodies. Anything can happen, including surprise and delight beyond expectation.

Contemporary spectacles exhibit a wide diversity of intent and outcome. The Kumbh Mela brings Hindu worshippers together every three years, while the annual Hajj sees millions of faithful Muslims making the journey to Mecca. The celebration of carnival in cities around the world originated as an opportunity for Catholics to prepare for their forty-day period of fasting and reflection during Lent. Crowds gathered on the National Mall in Washington, DC, to hear Martin Luther King; to protest against the Vietnam War; and to bear witness to the first display of the AIDS Memorial Quilt in 1987. In February 2003, up to thirty million people worldwide protested the impending Iraq War, including three million in Rome and over 750,000 in London ('Millions Join' 2003). The Tour de France, FIFA World Cup football, Olympic Games, Burning Man and Glastonbury festivals, demonstrations in Tiananmen Square and North Korea's Mass Games celebrate, inspire and perhaps indoctrinate. Failure to distinguish between the sustaining and indoctrinating potential of these events is to overlook one of propaganda's fundamental strategies: appealing deception. Rockwell, the designer of public spectacles, concludes: 'I

think the power of live experience runs the gamut from sublime to horrific; it certainly has been a tool to corrupt. But that is the exception, not the rule' (2006: 20).

The 2012 London Olympics opened with a spectacle promoting international athletes, corporate sponsors and glorious Great Britain.

As the London 2012 Summer Olympics approached, the tide of scepticism seemed almost irreversible. There was the heavy-handed sponsorship, the draconian security, the ticketing problems, the ballooning budget, and the lurking fear that the Opening Ceremony might be, in director Danny Boyle's pungent description, 'shite'. It took less than four hours on the night of Friday, 27 July to turn the whole country around. Not only was the ceremony demonstrably not shite, it was the most surprising, moving, spectacular cultural event this country had ever seen . . . It left viewers giddy with delight, feeling that this really was modern Britain, in all its berserk, multi-faceted glory. (Lynskey 2013: 82)

This spectacular event took the form of an iceberg: 10 per cent visible above the water and 90 per cent submerged below the surface as audience delight, nationalism and expectation.

Propaganda exploits the ambiguous potential of spectacle to celebrate or indoctrinate, and we should question what spectacles want us to believe and do. Some spectacles herald the transfer of power to new elites. Gatherings of the faithful, of sports fans and music lovers, are opportunities for celebration, healing and renewal. If we condemn all mass gatherings or ritual displays, we risk abandoning community, collective action and celebration. If people avoid demonstrating for environmental protection, human rights or political freedom because they are mere spectacles, they lose an opportunity to communicate, both to themselves and their leaders. Democracy itself is a spectacle happening within a 'tolerated margin of mess'.

Exercise questions

1. How does your culture attempt to control images and their circulation? What images are forbidden or censored?
2. Describe the symbols, regalia and other visual signifiers used to identify a contemporary ideology, group or movement.
3. Describe an image that made a memorable impact on you and changed the way you see the world. What accounts for the power of this image?

4. Photograph examples of simulations (Baudrillard) and hyperreality (Eco).
5. Debate the reliability of photographic evidence, either orally in class, in a written paper or in an online discussion.
6. Describe a recent spectacle that you feel is propagandistic. What was the intended purpose? How was the audience organised to witness the spectacle? What did the spectacle look like?
7. Make a short video that captures the spirit and meaning of a mass celebration and upload it to the internet for public viewing.



Figure 4 'Ocracy: the unseen elites'. Photo: M. Soules, San Francisco, 1991.