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The Graphic Revolution: Power and the Image (MLA Style British English)

We live at a time that has been characterised variously as ‘post industrial’, ‘post modern’, ‘late capitalist’ or, as Giddens would prefer, ‘late modern’. Giddens’ term is potentially the most consensual because it avoids debates which centre on questions such as: What comes after post modernism? Or: Was the Soviet Union really state capitalist? We feel that our lived experiences are qualitatively different from those of our forebearers. ‘Late modernity’ encapsulates this feeling of difference without getting bogged down with ideological polemics. This essay attempts to characterise living in late modernity, placing particular emphasis on the way social media and technology has impacted our everyday lives.

One of the key changes which has made an impact on our lives over the past hundred years or so is what Boorstin calls the ‘graphic revolution’. Today images pervade every aspect of everyday life. ‘[M]an’s ability to make, preserve, transmit, and disseminate precise images’ (Boorstin 13) has meant that we are constantly surrounded by such images. But it could be argued that prehistoric man also created images and, later, the Greeks, the Etruscans and the Romans depicted human activity. Similarly, the spectacle has been around for a very long time. In AD 80, at the Roman Coliseum, a hundred days were given over to the games. This involved gladiator fights and other shows such as fights between Christians and animals. But although the Emperor Augustus tried to limit the number of shows of gladiator fights to two a year, the aristocrats, who sponsored the shows, managed to evade these restrictions (Hopkins). The shows also created their own heroes in the form of the gladiators. Hopkins writes: ‘The victorious gladiator, or at least his image, was sexually attractive. Graffiti from

the plastered walls of Pompeii carry the message: “Celadus [a stage name, meaning Crow’s Roar], thrice victor and thrice crowned, the young girls’ heart-throb, and Crescens the Netter of young girls by night”.

Boorstin emphasises the power of the media, especially in politics, so the ability to manipulate the media has become the key to perceived success. One of the most definitive moments in the role that the media plays became all too clear when Kennedy beat Nixon in the first televised presidential debate before the elections of 1960. The young, good-looking Kennedy, who appealed to the female sector of the electorate, completely outclassed a flu-ridden, exhausted, middle-aged man whose refusal to wear makeup to avoid sweating in front of the cameras effectively sealed his fate.

Fast forward fifty–six years to the presidential debates which see Donald Trump debating Hilary Clinton. Most commentators agree that for the first two debates, at least, little of substance concerning future United States policy was said. The debates centred entirely on the way the candidates presented themselves, as people, to the American electorate. Both candidates, but especially Trump, provided talk show hosts, comedians and impersonators with plenty of hilarious material to keep them going, at least until after the elections.

Boorstin’s definition of pseudo events – that they are not spontaneous; that they are usually designed to be reported or reproduced; that their relationship with reality is ambiguous; that they usually aim to be a self-fulfilling prophecy – befit Trump’s argument that if he were to lose the election it would have been rigged. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy – it is rigged because he said it was rigged. For Trump supporters, losing the election is proof that it was rigged and that Trump was right all along. Rationality loses out on perception – perception is all. Boorstin exemplifies the fabrication of pseudo-events by referring to past masters such as F. D. Roosevelt and J. R. McCarthy – both of them able manipulators of the media. But pseudo-events are still the stuff of politics. At the Alfred E. Smith Memorial

Foundation Dinner, Trump, once again, accused Hilary Clinton of being so corrupt that she was kicked off the Watergate Commission (“Trump Booed at Catholic Fundraising Dinner”). This falsehood had been circulating ever since Jerry Zeifman had implied that he had sacked the young Hilary Clinton. Zeifman, however, was not Clinton’s superior so he could never have sacked her, and Clinton remained on the payroll of the Commission until it was disbanded after Nixon resigned (Kessler). The saying ‘Never let the truth get in the way of a good story’ is compellingly apt here, especially as it is normally attributed to the journalist Mark Twain. Ironically, it is not even certain that Mark Twain ever said or wrote it, but if people believe he did then another pseudo-event has been created or, as the Thomases might say, ‘If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’ (Thomas and Thomas 572).

But Trump is not the only example. Conspiracy theorists gain more conviction as their theories become more far-fetched. In part, the Kennedy assassination and the Warren Commission’s Report are to blame. It is hard to find a single event in the history of modern America, or indeed of other democratic societies, which had such far-reaching implications for the ability of the public to believe in what the politicians were saying. Legitimacy was granted to the disbelieving. Conspiracy theorists could then argue that Princess Dianna was, in fact, assassinated by the royal family. Such a theory is much more entertaining than the mundane idea that the driver was drunk and lost control of the car.

The power of the media is most aptly epitomised by Orson Well’s hoodwinking of the radio audience into believing that the Earth was being invaded by Martians. It is also apparent in Trump’s admiration for the actor Harrison Ford, who played the president of the United States in *Air Force One*. While Trump commented, ‘He stood up for America’, Ford, incredulous, replied, ‘Donald, it was a movie. It’s not like this in real life’ (Tolhurst). The confusion between reality and fiction is highlighted by the murder of John Lennon by

somebody whose motive was none other than the desire for fame. Ironically, while most people remember John Lennon, few remember the name of his assassin.

Boorstin's distinction between pseudo-events and propaganda is not entirely convincing. He argues that while 'a pseudo-event is an ambiguous truth, propaganda is an appealing falsehood' (Boorstin 34). But there seems to be much fluidity between the two definitions, which makes the distinction unsatisfactory. In the first place, there is no reason why propaganda should not deal in half truths. And, by his own recognition, 'pseudo' comes from the Greek word meaning 'false'. So where is the ambiguity in the truth? It must be recognised that Boorstin gives as an example of propaganda the misinformation peddled by the Nazis. It can equally be argued that the Nazis would not have been so effective if their propaganda had not resonated with some of the popular feelings at the time. The 1930s were desperate times in Germany and the financial success of the Jews made them easy targets for Nazi propaganda as they were seen as being responsible for the poverty of the German Gentiles. The tactic of labelling is used by Trump just as it was used by Hitler. For example, Trump declared that he would ban Muslims from entering the United States and characterized Mexican immigrants as murderers and rapists.

Pseudo-events play a major role in persuading the uncommitted to fall in line. The idea that America is fighting a 'war on terror', a catch-phrase which gained popularity after President George W. Bush used it after the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, was useful for shoring up support for xenophobic sentiment. Wars are generally seen as being waged between countries or regions. The use of the term to describe American attempts to capture or kill terrorists seems to be a good example of a pseudo-event. But, more importantly, it was used to justify American military involvement in any country where the government felt that public opinion would acquiesce – notably in Iraq. If the 'war on terror' was a pseudo-event, it was also an umbrella term to disguise the pursuit of American interests

by military means. Propaganda also feeds on the catch-phrase or slogan. In Nazi Germany it was *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*; in contemporary America and Western societies it is ‘the war on terror’. As with any slogan, if you say it often enough it becomes real.

The image creates the celebrity. Reality shows, like *Celebrity Big Brother* and *Celebrity Apprentice*, present opportunities for those without talent to become famous, but they also serve to keep the famous in the public eye. The power of the celebrity is also patent when we consider why celebrities are used for advertising. It goes beyond the use of famous actors to market beauty products; celebrities are used to promote alternative medicines such as chelation therapy for the treatment of autism. Jenny McCarthy, an actress whose name is hardly known outside of the United States, became more famous as an activist promoting research into alternative treatments for autism than she ever was as a Playboy ‘bunny’. The mother of an autistic child, she claims that vaccines cause autism and that chelation therapy helped heal her son. The myth that vaccines, in particular the MMR vaccine, are linked to autism results from the publication of a fraudulent article in *The Lancet* in 1998 (Godlee et al.). In 2010, the General Medical Council (GMC) found Wakefield guilty of serious professional misconduct and he was struck off the medical register (“The Wakefield Factor”). The interim period from 1998 to 2010 witnessed the increasing refusal of parents to vaccinate their children and the consequent increase in preventable diseases such as measles which, in turn, led to increased disability and some fatalities. The role of the celebrity was crucial to this development as was the role of the media in general. Your average Joe does not read *The Lancet*, but he does watch television and, along with being able to name most of the Kardashian family, will remember Jenny McCarthy as the ‘bunny’ who got her son’s autism treated with chelation therapy. In fact, a study conducted by the University of Michigan reported that 24% of respondents placed some trust in celebrities’ advice on vaccine, while 2% trusted them a lot (Freed et al.).

The cult of personality, the notion of celebrity, has been interpreted in different ways via the sociological imagination of several thinkers. Carlyle divided heroes into six different types: divinity, poet, prophet, priest, man of letters, and king. On the charismatic leader, Weber wrote, 'If he wants to be a prophet, he must perform miracles; if he wants to be a war lord, he must perform heroic deeds' (249). Writing contemporaneously, Mills' and Boorstin's views approximate each other. Boorstin writes of 'a person who is known for his well-knownness' (57), while Mills describes celebrities as 'The Names that need no further identification' (71–72).

No clear definition exists as to the exact nature of the phenomenon of the celebrity. The Kardashian phenomenon provides a starting point for a consensus on the kind of phenomena which should provide the material for analysis. The Kardashian sisters have, respectively, 67 million (Kim), 57.8 million (Kylie Jenner) and 54.2 million (Kendal Jenner) Instagram followers (Ryan) and a combined 96.8 million Twitter fans (Gharnit). Given that the entire population of the United States is estimated at approximately 331 million ("Population United States 2021"), this means that – assuming that the same followers follow all three sisters – approximately one sixth of Americans follow them on Instagram; and we have not even discounted babies and children who are too young to have an Instagram account. The numbers are astounding. Basically, something has happened over the last century which has allowed a well-to-do American family with no noteworthy talent to occupy huge segments of media time to the extent that, in the English speaking world, not knowing who the Kardashians are legitimises accusations of ignorance. As Boorstin states, 'Knowledge of pseudo-events – of what has been reported, or what has been staged, and how – becomes the test of being "informed"'. News magazines provide us regularly with quiz questions concerning not what has happened but concerning "names in the news" – what has been reported in the news magazines' (40).

The Kardashian phenomenon could never have occurred in Durkheim's segmented societies; it is only possible in late modernity.

If, however, we can talk about a radical change in human existence which has taken place over the last century, it is wrong to suggest that a 'graphic revolution' is mainly responsible for this change. A number of important phenomena bear witness to significant qualitative changes in late modernity. Institutions such as the family have been radically altered as, particularly in the United States, divorce rates rose exponentially from the 1970s and flattened off towards the end of the century when cohabitation became a real alternative to marriage. In addition, AIDS had an enormous influence over attitudes towards sexual relationships. But late modern technology has accelerated change. Social media can connect people in different corners of the world, which may mean that at some time they connect physically. In the 'Forward to the 25th Anniversary Edition' of *The Image*, referring to late modern technology (the walkman, the mobile phone, etc.), Boorstin writes, 'Every day seeing there and hearing there takes the place of being there' (vii). This was in 1987 – before the iPad, the smartphone, Skype and other paraphernalia, and social media such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, which have taken the place of face-to-face social interaction.

Globalisation implies 'disembedding', meaning the "lifting out" of social relations from local contexts and their rearticulation across indefinite tracts of time-space' (Giddens 242). When the brutality of the war in Vietnam was brought home to Americans via televised images in the nineteen-sixties it was 'disembedded' from its geographical setting. It entered the living rooms of the Americans who might be forced to combat in a country they hardly knew existed. The slaughter of slaves for entertainment in the Roman Coliseum was witnessed only by spectators who were physically present, while Isis can post the murder of prisoners on the Internet to be viewed at whatever time the spectator wishes. The spectator is not present during the performance; the performance is disembedded and the real horror is

transformed into pixels. As with pornography, the experience is vicarious but, unlike experience before the 'graphic revolution', it is all pervasive and immediately accessible.

Borrowing the concept of alienation from Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (the separation of Man from his own nature), Debord writes: 'The alienation of the spectator, which reinforces the contemplated objects that result from his own unconscious activity, works like this: The more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires' (16). So, using the example of pornography, we can clarify this point. Pornography is now freely available on the internet. Although human beings are sexual, the immersion of the individual in fantasy via pornography can be seen as an example of alienation, which is only possible in late modern societies where technical advances combined with consumer demand have made the mass production and consumption of pornography possible.

For a counterintuitive argument against the idea of alienation we have to imagine what adults would be like if there were no images – no Art, no pornography, and no creativity – and this, naturally, begs the question: What is human nature? Marx himself emphasised that humans are constantly engaged in production. The production of images is only one aspect of this. Life without the production of images would not be human. So when Debord writes, '[e]verything that was directly lived has receded into a representation' (7), he is really arguing that human creativity in capitalist society has made humans slaves to the image. In fact, the consumer of images is not, normally, their creator. The key point for Debord is that, instead of living life as he thinks human beings should, their existence is vicarious: the glamour enjoyed by others is experienced through the pages of magazines; film heroes live what we do not, but we feel their triumphs and their defeats; pornography is a substitute for real sex. But this also begs the question: In what way is this so different from the bloodthirsty spectacles of Ancient Rome? The gladiators were heroes then; the spectators experienced excitement via the

spectacle and hence, one can argue, that this too is vicarious.

What seems to be the crux of the matter is that 'alienation' is a matter of degree. In pre-industrial times manufactured images did not pervade our everyday lives. The Roman citizen would have to make an effort to get to the Coliseum, and time devoted to the spectacle would be limited and separated from ordinary life. In the early modern period, for the classes that could read, the imagination could help the reader to live vicariously, but the 'graphic revolution' quickened up the process, invading every corner of our everyday lives, and transforming the dreamer into the slave of the image.

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