

Image

Year in, year out, countless thousands of men and women spend a small fortune flying across the globe to visit Paris in order to join a queue to be allowed, a group at a time, to enter a room to catch a glimpse of the most famous painting in the world, the *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci. This painting has been described as ‘the best known, the most visited, the most written about, the most sung about, the most parodied work of art in the world’.¹ And for a few minutes, those who have laid out a great deal of money, and have gone to so much trouble and personal inconvenience, are allowed into the room where they may feast their eyes on the masterpiece.

But, the strange thing is, hardly any of them actually look at the painting when they get the chance. Certainly, they do not really look at it. Rather, they busy themselves taking out their smart phones, raising them over the heads of their fellow-rubber-necks in front of them, and gaze at the painting through the back of the said phones. Standing back and watching, it’s like a swaying hedgehog with raised spines. What is more, the people don’t actually look at the painting through their phone; their real purpose is to capture a digital image of the *Mona Lisa* on their phone. The fact that they could have obtained a better image at trivial cost and staying at home never enters their heads. Anyway that’s not the point. It’s not the painting, nor is it the image of the painting that matters. What the people long for – what they need – what they will spend and travel for is proof that they have actually been in the same room as the painting. They want an image of the painting on their phone, an image which they have captured for themselves.

¹ Wikipedia.

Image

But that's not the end of it. Most of those who get into the Louvre, have another purpose: the real purpose of their visit is that they might actually turn their back of the painting and take a selfie – capturing an image of themselves with the *Mona Lisa* painting in the background.

Think about it! It's not the lady herself – Lisa Gherardini – that counts; it's not da Vinci's actual brushwork that counts; it's not the image of the painting that counts; what really matters is the image of self – me – in the same room as the *Mona Lisa*. Think! The reality was this noblewoman. Leonardo da Vinci painted an image of her, and a smart phone captures an image of that image. And the selfie captures an image of self with an image of that image of the Italian woman in the background. So what is the reality – the noblewoman, the image of the woman, the image of the image, or what? As the pigs and the men morphed into each other in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, image and reality have changed place – or become one and the same. Image has become reality; and *vice-versa*.

We still have not exhausted the purpose of the *Mona Lisa* performance. By means of social media and internet availability, these countless selfie images are transmitted to millions within seconds. And that's the real purpose: take a selfie of me with my back to the *Mona Lisa*, and *post it on social media, craving as many 'likes' as I can get*. That's what it is all about!

It's not just the *Mona Lisa*. People use their phones to capture an image of the food they have cooked or paid good money for. Why? In order to post it on the internet. It's not the food that counts; it's the image of the food. Or rather, the publication of that image. *And the 'likes'*.

The world is awash with image (and 'likes'). And image is the thing – in all walks of life. Take politics. As I was beginning to write this in 2022, the Conservative party in the UK was choosing its new leader. Although typical Tory-party members remain more attuned to the printed word than

Image

the internet, the candidates realised that the image of themselves they project on social media platforms is still vital.² And surely we have not forgotten the way Donald Trump, as President, used – or, rather, abused – social media to conduct USA politics, including international ‘diplomacy’.

Moreover, since computer software such as Photoshop (and even more sophisticated packages) are readily available to a mass market, we now know that the internet and the press is weighed down, not merely with image, but with *fake* image. So much so, people are rightly beginning to doubt what they see in the media. (The same goes for fake-news, both written and spoken).

The logical outcome is inevitable: sensible people will come to believe nothing is what it seems. In an age increasingly dominated by social media, we find ourselves living in a world of fantasy, in a culture dominated by image. It’s not just the amateurs at the Louvre, or cooks sitting at their kitchen tables. I have mentioned politicians. The fact is, professional image-makers have set up dream-factories manufacturing fantasy worlds for us all to dwell in. Real life is a movie, and the movie is real life. The age in which we live might well be styled ‘the age of the image’: more images are produced in seconds today than were produced throughout the entire twentieth century. Global business managers, advertisers, bank governors, politicians, television producers, internet scammers, and the like, know that image and presentation is the key; vast sums of money can be made by clever use of image.³

² See ‘Liz Truss v Rishi Sunak: Who’s winning the social media war?’ (BBC News website 23rd July 2022).

³ A scammer who wants victims to move large sums of money into his account in a get-rich-quick scheme will present an image of affluence: he will be seen with an expensive car, watch, clothes, all in luxurious or exotic surroundings. And when he posts – if he ever does – any warning, he makes sure that the viewer’s eyes are diverted by posting a catchy video alongside at the same time.

Image

News, especially disaster, is now a spectacle and *vice-versa*. When mass television first erupted in the UK in the 50s, the set standing in the corner was dismissed by the smug, self-righteous, superior sophisticates as ‘the goggle box in the room’. But joke has become reality. Most of us have succumbed. Marx got it wrong, at least for our time: goggling is now the people’s opiate. A road accident on the north-bound motorway produces accidents on the south-bound because drivers continue to drive even though they are transfixed, goggling across the safety barrier.

Of course, this is nothing new; it’s only the technology that’s new. The careful cultivation of image has been with us since Adam fell. Fifty years ago, as I myself observed, alongside a viewing platform within sight of the Eiffel Tower, motor coaches would pull up in a constant stream, jam-packed with Japanese tourists, and out would pour streams of chattering men and women clutching cameras, collapsible tripods, light meters, flash guns, and all the rest of the paraphernalia required in those antediluvian days, the remainder of the gear swinging round their necks. Click, click, click went the shutters. Then a super-rapid packing up and scramble back into coach to tear off into the traffic, heading for the next site – victim, I almost said – on the list. The whole process had taken little more time than it takes to read about it. The tourists who had travelled 6000 miles to see the Eiffel Tower had not actually – really – seen the massive wrought-iron construction. They had captured an image of the Eiffel Tower. Which, of course, is what they wanted. Today, it would be a smart-phone selfie posted on the worldwide web, going viral while-you-wait. Or, at least, that would be the hope.

Advertisers no longer try to sell a product; they have long learned better! A product? What’s that? They sell a dream; they persuade customers to spend to buy into a dream conjured up by an image; as the 1997 pop song expressed it:

Image

‘Live the Dream’!⁴ Presentation, show, appearance, image, parade, packaging, display, fantasy, aspiration, the promise of the holy grail of happiness, contentment, fulfilment, satisfaction... you name it. My dentist, to judge by the permanent writing on the wall behind the receptionist’s desk, is in the business of selling me the smile I deserve; that is, the image I am supposed to crave.

As I have said, I don’t want to give the impression that all this is a modern problem.

Form, or show, outward appearance, image, as I have hinted, has been top of the agenda since Adam. The Nazi, Joseph Goebbels, was a past master at the game on behalf of his god, Adolf Hitler.⁵ Read the novels of Jane Austen, and you will come across a society dominated by form, appearance, manners, etiquette, image, how things look. Her novels not only poke withering fun at those whose lives were consumed by such, but their story-lines depend absolutely on it. Victorian society, similarly, was consumed with outward appearance, with image: what went on behind closed doors often bore little resemblance to outward appearance.⁶ But it

⁴ ‘I just want to be thinking thoughts that I think,/ Dreaming my dreams and drifting within./ I don’t know where I’m goin,/ But I know where I’ve been./ Come on, live your dream’.

⁵ When seeking power, Hitler could project an image a man of law and democracy, one who was decent and honourable, and when he got his hands on absolute power, he projected an image of a Reich ruled by order, work and discipline. But it was all an illusion. He used democracy only to overthrow it, and his chaotic government of the country was a system – if it can be dignified by calling it such – amounting to nothing more than an anthill of innuendo, intrigue, sycophantism, confusion, rivalry, betrayal and social-Darwinianism. Hitler himself was indolent.

⁶ Indeed, Albert and Victoria were determined to rescue the disastrous Hanoverian monarchy in a time of republican revolution by presenting the royal family as a model of domestic bliss and moral purity. On the first count, the mother (in particular) and her nine children proved a disastrous failure, and on the second, the loucheness of some of Victoria’s offspring remains a byword, But

Image

was the outward that was vital – how things looked; the inward, the real, could, by and large, take care of itself – or, not!

A euphemism for ‘propaganda’ in these PC days, of course, is ‘presentation’. Who doesn’t realise that presentation is king? When, in 1996, the would-be Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair, repeated the mantra: ‘Education! Education! Education!’, what he really meant – what really happened when he seeking to get his hands on power – was ‘Presentation! Presentation! Presentation!’ Don’t take my word for it. Roy Hattersley (and he should know) spoke of the way New Labour under Blair ditched the embarrassing (for electoral purposes) Clause IV of the 1918 Labour party manifesto (that is, workers had to get their hands on all the levers of power).⁷ In 1995, there was a brief discussion on the principle (cleverly managed and conducted at a time to minimise debate) until, as Hattersley cynically put it, the debate was ‘disposed of before coffee time’, after which, ‘we were able to turn to the aspects of policy we most enjoyed – not formulation but presentation’.⁸ Hattersley remarked on

the monarchy survived – just – to be fully rescued by Edward VII, Victoria’s heir, who turned his parents’ model on its head: outward show and ceremonial, not domestic fidelity, was key for him. The principle worked, and by it the monarchy has remained intact (just about) to this day: outward form is what counts, despite what goes on behind (mostly) closed doors. In a fallen world, among natural men, it always does; the institutional Church has not escaped – the charade, in the UK, being enforced by the connection between the Monarch and the State Church. See my ‘Tale of Two Coronations: Farcical & Real’ on my sermonaudio.com web page, and also in my *Royal Reflections*.

⁷ ‘To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service’.

⁸ Roy Hattersley: *Who Goes Home? Scenes from a Political Life*, Little, Brown and Company, London, 1995, p292.

Image

Peter Mandelson's brilliance in engineering all this, but did not fail to draw attention to the calamitous downside:

Image often took precedence over the ideas, and presentation, instead of being no more than a delivery system, was regarded as the mighty warhead which would blow the enemy to pieces.⁹

So much for image – for now!

⁹ Hattersley p293. There was no shortage in the number of examples he gave to illustrate what he was talking about. Here's another that came after Hattersley's book: think about the wrapping that sold the 2003 Iraq War to the citizens of the UK.