Canvas and Conquest: Art, Propaganda, and Iconography in Empires

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Introduction

Empires have always painted their ambitions onto the surfaces of everyday life. From triumphal arches to televised rallies, from coins that fit in a palm to screens that fit in a pocket, visual culture has been the most portable, persuasive instrument of rule. This book investigates how images, objects, and built environments do political work: how they naturalize authority, mobilize publics, and seed resistance. In tracing these dynamics across eras and geographies, Canvas and Conquest argues that the grammar of power is written in lines, colors, materials, and choreographed spectacles as much as in laws and ledgers.

Our journey begins in antiquity and proceeds to the present, not to compile a museum of styles but to decode recurring strategies. Roman triumphs stitched military conquest to urban theater; Byzantine icons braided sanctity with sovereignty; early Islamic calligraphy made the Word itself a visual authority. Later, colonial cartographies mapped possession into being, while revolutionary emblems in France and Haiti refined a modern vocabulary of participation and loyalty. Each case study serves as a lens on a larger question: how do images convert ideology into felt experience?

Methodologically, the book draws from art history, political theory, and media studies. We pair iconology with rhetorical analysis, semiotics with the study of institutions and infrastructures. A fresco or a photograph is never only a picture; it is a device embedded in networks of production, circulation, and reception. Attention to materials—the durability of stone, the reproducibility of print, the virality of digital media—helps explain how messages scale from the intimate to the imperial. Equally crucial is an ethics of spectatorship: who is addressed, who is excluded, and who is coerced into seeing.

While propaganda often evokes manipulation from above, we approach it more broadly as the orchestration of meaning by states, parties, and movements—sometimes subtle, sometimes spectacular. Legitimacy emerges where aesthetics and administration meet: in the pageantry of coronations, the cadence of campaign posters, the lighting of monumental architecture, the framing of televised leaders. Yet power is never total. Images also fracture, misfire, or are reappropriated. Iconoclasm, satire, and counter-memories reveal that the same visual tools that stabilize rule can unsettle it.

The modern chapters track the migration of imperial logics into nation-states and platforms. Industrial fairs and world’s expositions rehearsed futures as faits accomplis. Fascist architecture scaled bodies into obedient masses, while democratic polities

learned to market themselves with brand discipline. In the Cold War, rockets and refrigerators became competing icons of destiny and everyday abundance, and today, memes and microtargeted videos weaponize attention at the velocity of the feed. Stadium choreographies, luxury skylines, and algorithmic dashboards all demonstrate how sovereignty is staged, quantified, and felt in the twenty-first century.

This book is written for art historians seeking political stakes, political scientists seeking visual methods, and media scholars seeking longue durée context. It offers a comparative framework for analyzing symbols across regimes, a vocabulary for distinguishing spectacle from ritual, narrative from index, and a toolkit for reading monuments alongside timelines and timelines alongside monuments. If empires once carved their promises into marble, they now inscribe them in pixels; but the problem is unchanged: how do images make power seem natural, necessary, or irresistible—and how might they be unmade?

What follows is both a map and an invitation. Readers can proceed linearly or enter through the chapters that resonate with their research questions and teaching needs. Across the cases, the aim is consistent: to show how visual forms are not mere illustrations of politics but sites where politics happens. By learning to see like an empire and to see against it, we sharpen our understanding of cultural power—and our capacity to contest it.

CHAPTER ONE: Theories of Visual Power: From Icon to Ideology

The assertion that "a picture is worth a thousand words" holds particular weight in the realm of political power. Images are not mere adornments; they are potent instruments of communication, capable of shaping public perception, legitimizing authority, and even inciting resistance. From the earliest cave paintings to today's ubiquitous digital memes, visual culture has been inextricably linked to the mechanisms of control and persuasion within empires and societies. This dynamic relationship between what we see and what we believe forms the bedrock of understanding how visual power operates.

To grasp the profound influence of visual culture, we must delve into the theoretical frameworks that help us dissect its workings. This journey takes us from the foundational concept of the "icon" – an image imbued with symbolic meaning – to the complex interplay of "ideology" – the underlying beliefs and values embedded within visual texts. Ultimately, we seek to understand how these elements combine to create a compelling, often unstated, narrative of power.

One of the cornerstones of understanding visual power is semiotics, the study of signs and symbols and their interpretation. A sign is anything that stands for something else. In political visual semiotics, these signs are primarily images, colors, and symbols. For instance, a dove typically symbolizes peace, while the combination of a donkey and an elephant forming a white dove can signify unity between political parties. These symbols, when deployed within a political context, can evoke strong emotional responses and convey messages that bypass lengthy verbal explanations.

Roland Barthes, a prominent semiotician, explored how images communicate specific messages, distinguishing between coded iconic and non-coded iconic linguistic messages. He argued that signs operate on different levels of meaning, from the denotative (what is literally represented) to the connotative (the associated cultural and emotional meanings), and further, to the level of myth, where these connotations become naturalized beliefs. For example, the colors red, white, and blue, while merely colors denotatively, connote patriotism and liberty to many in the United States, thereby automatically capturing attention.

Iconography, a term often used interchangeably with the study of symbols, is a crucial lens for understanding how images communicate. It involves the investigation and explanation of symbols, pictures, and icons, deciphering their hidden meanings and significance. Historically, iconography has been employed in diverse fields, including

religion, art, and politics, with its symbols evolving to reflect the values of the communities that adopt them. Ancient civilizations, for example, used religious iconography to convey complex theological concepts to largely illiterate societies, while modern iconography serves a wider array of functions, including political propaganda.

Propaganda, at its core, is the orchestration of meaning by states, parties, and movements, often with the aim of shaping public opinion, motivating populations, and influencing the course of events. Visual storytelling is a particularly effective form of propaganda, leveraging universally recognized symbols such as flags, eagles, or fists to encapsulate national, spiritual, or ideological values. The Roman Empire, for instance, masterfully used triumphal arches, coins, and statues to glorify its leaders and celebrate military victories, strategically reinforcing its supremacy and legitimizing power.

Beyond mere interpretation, visual rhetoric examines how visual elements are used to communicate effectively and persuasively. It delves into how humans use images to convey messages, considering elements like size, color, line, and shape. The layout and spatial positions of these elements are instrumental in creating meaning, and their interpretation can vary across different audiences, societies, and cultures. Visual rhetoric emphasizes that images, like written texts, have a persuasive effect, and their structure can be analyzed to understand their impact.

The power of images extends beyond conscious processing; they can tap into fundamental human reasoning and stir strong emotions. Research suggests that nonpolitical but affectively evocative images can even predict political ideology, indicating that fundamental neural processing differences may structure political beliefs in ways previously unappreciated. This emotional resonance makes visual media particularly effective in politics, capable of shaping views of the world and impacting emotions in profound ways.

Ideology, in the context of visual culture, refers to the underlying ideas, values, and beliefs that images embody about society and politics. Images don't simply reflect reality; they actively construct it by selecting, framing, and presenting certain aspects while omitting others. This means that visual culture is never a neutral space; it is structured by power relations, amplifying certain voices and perspectives while silencing or marginalizing others. Ideological analysis seeks to expose these underlying biases and the social and political contexts in which images are produced and consumed.

Visual culture theory, an interdisciplinary field, examines how we create, consume, and interpret visual artifacts, encompassing everything from fine art and photography to advertising, film, and digital media. It offers a lens to understand how images shape our understanding of the world, influence our beliefs, and construct identities. This

theory recognizes that visual practices and representations are powerful in shaping understanding, negotiating identity, and maintaining or challenging social orders across diverse cultural contexts.

The concept of "visual regimes" emerges from visual culture theory, referring to the dominant ways of seeing and representing the world that are shaped by power structures. These regimes dictate not only what is seen but also what is deemed "seeable," legitimate, and politically significant. For example, mainstream media's visualization of environmental issues often focuses on dramatic images of natural disasters, shaping public perception of the problem.

The history of visual analysis itself reveals an ongoing expansion of frameworks, from early art criticism to mass media analysis and the computational processing of visual big data. Each theoretical lens, be it Marxist analysis highlighting economic ideologies, psychoanalytic approaches revealing unconscious dimensions, or feminist theory exposing gendered power relations, offers unique insights into how images create meaning and circulate power.

The development of linear perspective during the Renaissance, for instance, provided an early mathematical framework for understanding pictorial space, demonstrating that images operate according to systematic principles. This analytical approach laid the groundwork for later theories that would deconstruct the "hidden mechanisms" through which images produce meaning and shape subjectivity.

Walter Benjamin's seminal essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," published in 1935, addressed the changing functions of art in a capitalist society, particularly the impact of mass production on the "aura" of a work of art. Benjamin's ideas on artistic authenticity and the aestheticization of politics have profoundly influenced research in art history, cultural studies, and media theory. He argued that the social value of art changes with shifts in societal values and that artistic styles are shaped by historical circumstances and the organization of human sense-perception.

In recent decades, visual communication research in political science has seen a surge of interest, especially with the rise of new media. Scholars now analyze how images contribute to political communication, from campaign logos and flags to political advertisements and social media content. This involves decoding both the explicit and implicit meanings embedded in visual symbols, and understanding their interplay with linguistic elements in shaping political narratives and constructing collective identities.

However, the rapid circulation of images in the digital age presents both opportunities and challenges. While it allows for faster dissemination of political messages, it also makes images more susceptible to manipulation and alteration, blurring the lines between subjective truth and propaganda. This "information clutter" and the

decreasing attention spans of audiences make the strategic use of symbols and archetypes in politics even more crucial.

The power of visual art in politics is not without its controversies. Governments and institutions have historically attempted to suppress politically charged art, fearing its potential to incite rebellion. Censorship, imprisonment of dissident artists, and destruction of subversive works are common tactics employed by authoritarian regimes. Yet, art can also serve as a vital tool for resistance, providing a voice for the marginalized and challenging dominant power structures.

Ultimately, understanding the theories of visual power is not just an academic exercise; it is a critical skill in an increasingly image-saturated world. It enables us to move beyond simply appreciating or dismissing an image, to comprehend its construction, its intended audience, and its broader cultural and political implications. By deciphering the visual grammar of power, we can better analyze how empires, both ancient and modern, have used and continue to use images to sway populations, legitimize their rule, and even provoke resistance.

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