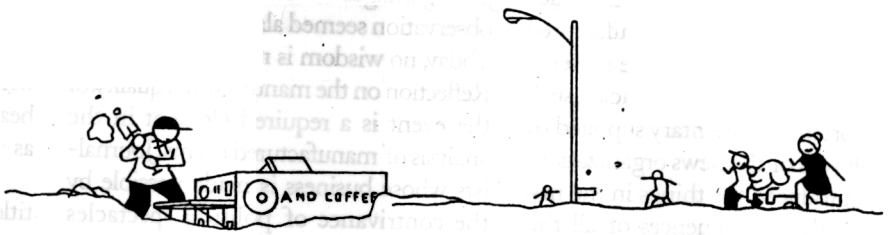
THE CRITICS



BOOKS

MASTERS OF THE MATRIX

Kennedy, Nixon, and the culture of the image.

BY LOUIS MENAND

"It was TV more than anything else that turned the tide," John F. Kennedy said on November 12, 1960, four days after his election to the Presidency. He was referring to the four televised debates between him and Richard Nixon, broadcast earlier that fall. Television debates are now nearly an official rite of passage in a politician's progress to the Presidency. Holding a Presidential election today without a television debate would seem almost undemocratic, as though voters were being cheated by the omission of some relevant test, some necessary submission to mass scrutiny.

That's not what many people thought at the time of the first debates. Theodore H. White, who subscribed fully to Kennedy's view that the debates had made the difference in the election, complained, in "The Making of the President 1960," that television had dumbed down the issues by forcing the candidates to respond to questions instantaneously. "Neither man could pause to indulge in the slow reflection and rumination, the slow questioning of alternatives before decision, that is the inner quality of leadership," White said. He also believed that Kennedy's "victory" in the debates was largely a triumph of image over content. People who listened to the debates on the radio, White pointed out, scored it a draw; people who watched it thought that, except in the third debate, Kennedy had crushed Nixon. (This little statistic has been repeated many times as proof of the distorting effects of television. Why not the distorting effects of radio? It also may be that people whose medium of choice or opportunity in 1960 was radio tended to fit a Nixon rather than a Kennedy demographic.) White thought that Kennedy benefitted because his image on television was "crisp"; Nixon's—light-colored suit, wrong makeup, bad posture—was "fuzzed." "In 1960 television had won the nation away from sound to images," he concluded, "and that was that."

Daniel Boorstin, the University of Chicago historian, who was later the Librarian of Congress, agreed, except that he didn't date the triumph of the image from 1960; he dated it from the start of what he called "the Graphic Revolution," back in the nineteenth century. Boorstin's "The Image," published in 1961, the same year as White's book on the Kennedy-Nixon race, is the work in which Boorstin introduced his (well-known) definition of a celebrity as a person well known for being well known. His argument was that the rise of mechanical means of communication and reproduction—the telegraph, photography, the high-speed printing press, radio, television—and the subsequent emergence of media "sciences," such as advertising and public relations, had produced a culture of what he called

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD AVEDON

The Kennedys were beautiful, and they photographed beautifully. They did not need to do much to stage-manage the occasion.

"pseudo-events," events that are neither real nor illusory, neither genuine nor fake, like, he said, the Kennedy-Nixon debates. The debates were manufactured spectacles designed to generate material for further manufactured spectacles, such as postmortem commentary supplied by the employees of the news organizations that had produced the things in the first place. But the consequences of all this contrivance were real enough. "Pseudo-events . . . lead to emphasis on pseudo-qualifications," Boorstin maintained. "If we test Presidential candidates by their talents on TV quiz performances, we will, of course, choose presidents for precisely these qualities. In a democracy, reality tends to conform to the pseudo-event. Nature imitates art."

The maverick economist Kenneth Boulding had published a book called "The Image" in 1956, but Boulding was mostly interested in the fact that people's behavior is often based on pictures they hold of the world that may have little empirical basis but that serve as "reality." Boulding thought that this raised intriguing epistemological issues. Though Boorstin found the epistemology of the image intriguing, too, his book was a jeremiad. Visual images were central to the culture that Boorstin was attacking, but by the term "image" he meant something all-encompassing, something like a substitute reality. Today, his book, prose style aside, reads, rather remarkably, like the work of a postmodern theorist. A lot of what French writers such as Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard later wrote about the "society of the spectacle" and the "simulacrum" Boorstin had already said.

Boorstin thought that the image had taken over not because of anything to do with the nature of capitalism (a word that, amazingly, does not appear in his book) but because Americans couldn't face ordinary life, in which the excellent and the extraordinary are rare, and most things are difficult, imperfect, disappointing, or boring. Americans needed their experience to be constantly sweetened, like chewing gum, and a whole industry had grown up to provide this artificially enhanced reality. Boorstin thought that this pseudo-world had become, Matrix-like, so nearly complete that it controlled even its controllers.

"Our national politics has become a competition for images or between images, rather than between ideals," Boorstin concluded. "An effective president must be every year more concerned with projecting images of himself." In 1961, this observation seemed alarming or alarmist. Today, no wisdom is more conventional. Reflection on the manufactured quality of the event is a required element in the analysis of manufactured events. Journalists whose business is made possible by the contrivance of political spectacles masquerading as news—the photo op, the press conference, the television debate—feel obliged to point out, ruefully (or conveying an image of ruefulness), how much campaign energy is put into contriving political spectacles. The value of an image in politics is like the value of a stock in the market: it already reflects a discount against the future charge of dissimulation. This is the epistemological challenge that Boorstin and Boulding were talking about. A manufactured event is somehow true and not true. John Kerry on the motorcycle, George Bush on the flight deck: the knowledge that these perfectly real things are also "images" whose "reality" should be regarded with skepticism is part of their content. Everyone knows that "it's just an image." But what, exactly, does that mean?

Among the subjects of most enduring fascination for students of political image-making are the principals in the campaign that, for many people, started it all, Kennedy and Nixon themselves. Forty years after Dallas and thirty years after the Watergate hearings, opinion about the "real" Kennedy and the "real" Nixon is as unsettled as it ever was. You can still start an argument about it. Two new, serious books are devoted to the topic. David Lubin's "Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images" (California; $24.95) is an art historian's look at some of the famous photographs of John and Jackie Kennedy. David Greenberg's "Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image" (Norton; $26.95) is a political historian's study of Nixon as he appeared to, and was represented by, different audiences—liberals, the New Left, the press, Nixon loyalists, and so on. Lubin's book is mostly about images in the visual sense—photographs, movies, and paintings. Greenberg means "image" in the broader sense, as the name for any self-conscious or manufactured presentation. But their attitude toward the "culture of the image" is the same. They think that people don't read images so much as they read *into* images—that what they make of an image is conditioned by who they are and by what they already know. Those radio listeners who thought that Nixon won the debates heard what they were trained to hear and, as we all do, what they wanted to hear.

"Shooting Kennedy" lives up to its title. Readers who find that title a distasteful pun will probably feel that many of Lubin's interpretations—of Abraham Zapruder's film of the assassination as a New Wave movie, for example—are inappropriate, and inappropriate in a way that, for reasons not easy to articulate, feels somehow blasphemous. But this feeling is precisely what Lubin is trying to understand. It is his point of departure: the grip that photographic images of the Kennedys exert on the American imagination must be due to something more than the individual pictures themselves. They enlist feelings of defensiveness or piety, he thinks, because they resonate with a whole "culture of images" surrounding them. The Zapruder film is, in the end, a movie. You cannot detach your experience of watching it from your prior experience of watching movies. So that if it "reads" as a kind of horror movie, in which disaster strikes from above, without warning or reason, this might be because you have also seen Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds." Lubin's chase after contexts for the Zapruder film turns up, besides "The Birds," Hitchcock's "North by Northwest," Michelangelo Antonioni's "Blow-Up," Alain Resnais's "Last Year at Marienbad," Arthur Penn's "Bonnie and Clyde," and (somehow) Andy Warhol's "Blow-Job." He rates Zapruder's twenty-six-second movie "a crucial cinematic text of the twentieth century."

In this anthropological spirit—the spirit that treats every artifact as linked to every other artifact in the web of culture—Lubin puts pictures of the Kennedys next to Renaissance Madonnas, magazine advertisements, and television sitcoms. He has, admirably, no shame. For example, he notices that the poignant photograph of John John saluting his father's casket was printed in *Life* across from a full-page ad for I. W. Harper's Kentucky Bourbon featuring the image of a top-hatted Southern gentleman, in silhouette, offering a friendly salute. It's the kind of thing only an art historian (or

a Martian) would notice, but, once you see it, you start to wonder how it happened, and why no one at *Life* picked up the visual echo. The answer may be that people file their images in separate compartments—news in one place, ads in another—and don't think to compare them. "Shooting Kennedy" is an aggressive act of decompartmentalization.

Greenberg's approach to the political image is similar. Boorstin, Greenberg says, was right to identify image-making as having been central to American politics ever since the Administration of Franklin Roosevelt; he was wrong to associate it with inauthenticity. "Fears of image-making and jeremiads against inauthenticity rest on the faulty assumption that images are distinct from reality," Greenberg says. "These aren't shadows cast upon a cavern wall but the stuff of political experience itself." Nixon, he thinks, is the key figure in understanding this development. "No postwar politician did more to educate Americans to the primacy of images in politics," he says.

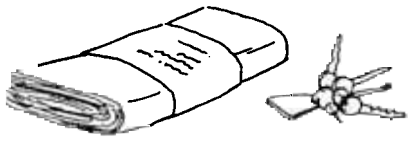
As both books remind us, the striking fact is that Nixon was much more sophisticated about image manipulation than Kennedy was. Of course, the Kennedys used the media for political purposes. They were neither innocents nor purists—unlike, for example, Adlai Stevenson, who, in his acceptance speech at the 1956 Democratic National Convention, called political advertising "the ultimate indignity to the democratic process" (a phrase quoted by Greenberg). But, as Lubin's analyses make clear, the artistry in most of the famous photographs of the Kennedys was due not to the Kennedys but, largely, to the photographers. People loved to take pictures of the Kennedys; the Kennedys were beautiful, and they photographed beautifully. They didn't need to do much to stage-manage their photo ops. Nixon was neither beautiful nor photogenic. For him, image manipulation was not a supplement to political life; it was close to a basic necessity.

From the start of his career, Nixon was surrounded by people whose experience was in advertising. One might assume that he sought those people out, but he seems, in fact, to have attracted them. His earliest backer, Roy Day, who founded the Committee of 100, in 1945, which recruited Nixon to run for Congress against Jerry Voorhis, sold advertising for a Southern California newspaper. H. R. Halde-

BRIEFLY NOTED

The Babes in the Wood, *by Ruth Rendell (Crown; $25).* In the matriarchy of British crime fiction, Rendell is the weird sister; her novels concern themselves with the more darkly enigmatic corners of motivation. Her tastes in this direction have sometimes outstripped her readers', and her most recondite tales now appear under the pen name Barbara Vine. Rendell's Chief Inspector Wexford mysteries are a somewhat friendlier affair, and in this, the nineteenth of the series, fans will be pleased to find the Wexfords staving off a flood in their garden and the Inspector's clueless elder daughter in trouble again. The plot—a series of puzzles surrounding the disappearance of two teen-agers in the care of a family friend—marches efficiently to its unguessable dénouement while demonstrating Rendell's grasp of the psychological dynamics of seduction and exploitation which lie at the heart of the case.

The Book of Hard Things, *by Sue Halpern (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $22).* Cuzzy Gage, eighteen years old and living in upstate New York, doesn't have much in the way of prospects: no job, no home, and no family, except for a father in a mental hospital and an estranged girlfriend and their baby son. He's been camping out in the woods, and winter is coming. When a schoolteacher from New York City takes Cuzzy in—partly to stem his own feelings of drift—an intense, unlikely friendship, full of wariness and misunderstandings, develops. This first novel by the essayist Sue Halpern recalls the author's nature writing in its evocation of the sparse rock and pine of the Adirondack countryside, dotted with trailers and streams and baronial retreats. At times, the social tensions between characters feel too obviously choreographed: the action takes place in a town called Poverty. But Halpern does her characters—both the deprived locals and the overcivilized, rootless newcomers—the service of neither condescending to nor ennobling them.



Stories from the City of God, *by Pier Paolo Pasolini, edited by Walter Siti, translated from the Italian by Marina Harss (Handsel; $24).* Pasolini should be better known in English as a writer—as a poet, novelist, and journalist—and this volume provides a good introduction. It's a collection of short pieces written between 1950, when Pasolini arrived in Rome, "the city of God," from his native Friuli, and 1966, and published mainly in newspapers and periodicals. The first half of the book is a stroll through lowlife Rome—the *ragazzi* (street boys) selling chestnuts on the Ponte Garibaldi, or diving off a float in the Tiber, or stealing fish from the city market to sell in Testaccio. The pieces in the second half range from commentary on Roman slang and on housing for the poor to an account of a day spent with Alberto Moravia. Throughout, the main character is the city, where "beauty and ugliness go hand in hand": "The latter renders the former touching and human. The former allows us to forget the latter."

American Jesus, *by Stephen Prothero (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $25).* To the Puritans who settled the Colonies, Jesus was a marginal figure, and the Old Testament more important than the New. In the four centuries since, however, he has slipped the bonds of Christianity altogether to become icon and brand, as American as Mickey Mouse or the Coca-Cola bottle. This wide-ranging history traces a dual evolution: of American religion (not only Christianity but Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism) in terms of its relationship to Jesus; and of his multiform manifestations in response to changing cultural currents, from Thomas Jefferson's publication of a book of Jesus' life and sayings that excised all mention of the miracles and the resurrection to the Hindu Vedantists' veneration of "Christ the Yogi."

man began his career at the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency; he volunteered to work for Nixon after watching the Checkers speech on television, in 1952.

Nixon's reliance on advertising expertise was eventually the subject of an exposé, Joe McGinniss's "The Selling of the President 1968"—a book presented, as the title suggests, as the underside of the stories that White was telling in his best-selling campaign histories. McGinniss quoted Boorstin extensively, and his contempt for Nixon's use of advertising was so intense that he just assumed that readers would share it. He seemed to feel that the fact that Nixon made a number of takes when recording television commercials was proof of a deep inauthenticity. Today, as Greenberg says, "The Selling of the President" seems naïve. Of course politicians produce television commercials, and of course they fix them up before they put them on the air. Television had something to do with turning Presidential campaigns into tactical image wars, but so did print-dinosaur journalists like White, who covered campaigns as though they were boxing matches, a sequence of punches and counterpunches, points and knockdowns, with a running score kept by opinion polls.

Nixon and Nixon's handlers were not dinosaurs and they were not Boorstinites. The man who wrote to Nixon in 1967 to explain how he could win the Presidency with a campaign waged mostly on television was William Gavin, who was an English teacher—which means, in 1967, that he had read Marshall McLuhan, and he cited him in his campaign memos. McLuhan had himself been an English professor; he had written important articles on topics like landscape in the poetry of Alfred Tennyson. In 1964, he published his big book, "Understanding Media," in which he took to task technological troglodytes like White and Boorstin. White had got it completely backward about the debates, McLuhan said. Nixon on television wasn't "fuzzed": he was, on the contrary, too well defined. Television dislikes definition; it favors blurriness. This is why movie stars don't travel well when they go over to television, and it is why Kennedy "won" the debates. Television is, in McLuhanite terms, a "cool" medium. Because the television image is relatively minimal, TV viewers become, paradoxically, more engaged. They are continually filling in information; so, as McLuhan explained, "anybody whose *appearance* strongly declares his role and status in life is wrong for TV." Nixon "lost," in other words, because he looked like a candidate for President. "When the person presented *looks* classifiable, as Nixon did, the TV viewer has nothing to fill in. He feels uncomfortable with his TV image. He says uneasily, 'There's something about that guy that isn't right.' " Kennedy's asset, therefore, was not his "crispness," as White imagined, but his blurriness. He "did not look like a rich man or like a politician. He could have been anything from a grocer or a professor to a football coach. He was not too precise or too ready of speech in such a way as to spoil his pleasantly tweedy blur of countenance and outline."

For Nixon and his handlers, the lesson was plain: he needed to project an image that voters could "fill in" as it suited them, and this, rather than the banal fact that Nixon campaigned using the methods of commercial advertising, is what McGinniss's book documents. By 1968, Nixon had mastered the trick of presenting himself as, if not all things to all people, enough things to enough people to win two Presidential elections. Greenberg notes that the phrase "the New Nixon" first appeared in 1953: almost from the start, Nixon was a politician who seemed perpetually to be reinventing himself. But the Nixon of the 1968 campaign, the Nixon who had on his team public-relations-savvy people like Roger Ailes and Leonard Garment, and who listened to them, is the Nixon who most deserves the epithet. This Nixon is the reason that people persist in thinking of Nixon as "complicated," and this Nixon made it possible for Greenberg to write a book on the many Nixons.

The test of Boorstin's prediction—that the image culture, and television in particular, would ruin democratic politics—is the men who have been elected to the Presidency since 1960. The question isn't whether any of them were elected because of television. White was probably right that television provided the edge for Kennedy in 1960, though in part that was because it gave him huge exposure—as many as a hundred and twenty million people watched one or more of the debates—in a race against a two-term Vice-President who was far more familiar to the electorate. The question is whether any President since 1960 would have been unelectable without television. It would be hard to make the case that one was. McLuhan's point that television prefers a soft focus may be true, but politicians had discovered the advantages of making themselves into screens on which voters could project their own hopes and fears long before television was part of the process. Appearing on television is something national leaders are compelled, these days, to do. A candidate who fell to pieces in front of a television camera would not be elected, and would not deserve to be.

McLuhan understood that television was not simply radio with pictures, or cinema in a box, but a medium with its own effects. Still, he exaggerated the cognitive side of things, and in this he was not so different from White and Boorstin and McGinniss. He, too, bought into the notion that new media had transformed public life. He just thought that it was all for the better—that it would bring about the end of war and the birth of the "global village."

But what makes the epistemological status of an image different from the epistemological status of a speech or an editorial? Print does not have a special relationship to reality or authenticity, and the electronic media, which McLuhan appointed himself the true prophet of, did not make people more responsible, empathetic, and engaged, either. Greenberg is surely right that images are not somehow distinct from "reality"—especially in political life, where projecting the appropriate image at the appropriate moment is part of leadership, whatever the politician says or does off camera.

This was especially the case during the Cold War; by 1960, the notion that the struggle against Communism must be waged primarily with images, the alternative being unthinkable, was well established, and is responsible for the special attention paid to the way Kennedy and Nixon "came across" as icons or as performers. But Nixon's career did not end in failure because he manipulated his image, or because there was a discrepancy between the way he appeared in public and the "real Nixon" whose voice we hear on the White House tapes. Nixon's problem didn't have anything to do with his image in an electronic media culture. It had to do with the Constitution, a document that was written with a pen. ♦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