



Propagating the self



BY MIRJAM KOOIMAN

1 From ancient coins with emblematic portraits of emperors to paintings emphasising the sitter's power, until the 19th century painters and sculptors played a significant role in expressing and maintaining political authority. Later, with the invention of photography and the rise of mass media, politicians found the means to use and disseminate their image even more effectively. The recent advent of social media adds yet another dimension to the power potential of the image.

10 Official portraiture allows for 'behind-the-scenes' views of leaders' lives. Whether seen barbecuing (Sheikh Mohammed of Dubai) or shirtless horse-riding (President Putin), these personal posts attract most 'likes' online.

When Barack Obama announced his presidential bid in 2007, the first iPhone had yet to be released. Obama was the first presidential candidate to effectively use social media as a major campaign strategy. Once elected, photojournalist Pete Souza was appointed chief White House photographer. With his behind-the-scenes images, he created a continuous stream of photographs on social media, turning the president of the United States into your ultimate Facebook friend. Playing around with kids, dancing with his wife, even fist-bumping a cleaner: these endearing images were strong signs of soft power which made the most influential man on Earth surprisingly human.

How today's political leaders use photography and social media to propagate their image

A rose in the desert

Increasing visibility through social media can humanise the image of a leader, but it can also reveal its very banality. If you're unsettled by the recent summary of Pete Souza's best pictures of 'the real Barack Obama' published in *The Guardian* – which all look so adorable that it might just be a bit too good to be true – you should definitely take a look at the Instagram account of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Despite the unimaginable brutality of the civil war there, Instagram depicts a parallel universe: a blissfully ignorant, sun-kissed world in which the saintly First Lady Asma embraces the poor, downtrodden, and disabled.

After decades of authoritarian rule by Bashar's father, there were great hopes that the young, Western-educated doctor and his attractive wife would usher in an era of increased openness and freedom. In March 2011, American *Vogue* published a glowing article entitled 'A Rose in the Desert' about Syria's first lady. It described Asma al-Assad as 'the most glamorous, freshest, and most magnetic of first ladies'. The Assads were labelled a 'wildly democratic' family that made Syria 'the safest country in the Middle East'. Photographs by James Nachtwey – perhaps the greatest war photographer alive – show a ponderous Asma with a Damascus skyline as her backdrop. Another image captures the Assads playing with their children, a low-key scene of domestic calm.

The article's appearance coincided with Assad's regime violently smashing down civil uprising, resulting in thousands of deaths, and the profile story magically disappeared from *Vogue's* website. Allegedly, the Syrian government had hired a PR firm to set up the *Vogue* magazine profile of Asma, with a contract of \$5000 per month to arrange the interview and photo shoot. We don't know why a famed photojournalist did the shoot, as opposed to a commercial photographer. It must have been uncomfortable for Nachtwey, who has publicly expressed his photography should 'bear witness' and be 'honest and uncensored', to see his images contrasting a sudden, brutal dictatorship.

It's too simplistic to describe Assad's media images as 'propaganda'. Isn't it outright desperate to efface thousands of pictures of devastated cities, dead bodies, and wounded children with flattering, polished pictures of Asma al-Assad? Was this propaganda produced to convince 'the people' of their power, or rather to reassure themselves through fictional self-portrayal?

Photographer versus politician

What of the typically strained relationship between populist leaders and artists? From the musicians declining to celebrate Trump's inauguration, to Wilders's view that the arts are merely a 'leftist hobby', artists have good reason to boycott populism, particularly if their art fails to align with the nationalist cause. However, just like past painters, photographers are often commissioned to immortalise influential figures, regardless of personal preference.

Helmut Newton seemed to relish one such task. Of Jewish descent and having fled Nazi Germany as an 18-year-old, he could have passed up an invitation to photograph Jean-Marie Le Pen, whose anti-Semitic views are well-documented. However, Newton states he was 'just the kind of guy I love to photograph'. Working on the portrait, the two got along so well that Newton persuaded Le Pen to pose with his Dobermans. As soon as it was published, *Le Monde* picked up on the similarities with a portrait of Hitler with his shepherd dog.

Was Nadav Kander on a comparable mission when assigned to portray Donald Trump as 'Person of the Year' for *Time* in 2016? His portrait of Trump immediately went viral, generating lively discussions. It was compared to a 1941 *Time* cover of Hitler, pictured on an antique chair, glancing aside, casting a shadow on the wall. The only word from the photographer himself can be found on Instagram, where he declared his intention to 'make a portrait that respects this crossroad in history with no political view of my own'. In an unrelated interview, Kander describes a good portrait as one 'that asks as many questions as it answers'. Mission accomplished.

The invisible sheikh

Despite politicians' strategic use of media, invisibility also shapes a leader's image. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is the self-appointed Caliph of the Islamic State and descendant of Muhammad. Followers have to surrender everything, be it their money or lives, to him. However, only two photos and a video of him exist. Even when speaking to his own fighters, Baghdadi reportedly wears a mask, earning him the nickname 'the invisible sheikh'. Nevertheless, thousands around the world pledge allegiance to his rule, acting under his command despite being thousands of miles away. His life in the shadows is often explained by his status as one of the world's most-wanted men. Some presume he has already been killed by a coalition air strike, but through highly effective propaganda campaigns, his audio-recordings continue to spread.

Using different strategies to propagate their image online, today's leaders are definitely exploring social media to 'befriend' voters. Or, at least, to let their message come across via tweets that summarise opinions loud and clear without any need for explanation. Others use their imagery on social media as self-justification, constructing a make-believe, self-approved world. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's invisible presence harks back to the historical example of the almighty emperor that is hardly ever seen by the people. Instead, the emperor appears on coins like a symbol, and his presence is felt through forces of power that dominate society in his name.

If any conclusion can be drawn from political leaders using their online image differently, it is that – at least at first sight – they seem to undermine the autonomy of artists by shaping their propaganda. Even without photographers making actual statements, it's worth considering the positions Souza, Nachtwey, and Kander took up in their assignments. With increasing frequency, leaders are choosing social media over official portraiture, taking back control of their own image. <<

