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ILLUSION AND SUBSTANCE -  
The Image in the Media

A study of the TV 'image'  
from a Christian perspective.  
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The power of the image down the centuries is scarcely in dispute. From earliest times images have played an important part both as a cultural and religious focus and also in defining the authority and social relationships of most societies. A study of the significance of the mask, the totem, the icon, the statue and the wallpainting in various societies would fill many books, but in this paper we shall narrow our enquiry to the use of the image in TV in Britain today.

*Images and Symbols*

It is usual to think of an image as a 2- or 3- dimensional artifact representative of something actual, or even purely imaginary, in the created world. By looking at the image we at once recognise what it stands for. In this an image differs from a symbol, which, as conventionally understood, stands for something with no basis for visual recognition.

The image, as it appears on the TV screens, is characteristic of the 20th century, whereas symbolic communication characterised the 16th to 19th centuries in Western Europe. Today's child spends more time in front of the single imaging system of television than he does at school. The change marks a great historical discontinuity and needs to be studied in depth. However, because it is not possible to study this subject neutrally, we shall first consider a Christian perspective on the meaning of the image and attempt to define what is involved more closely.

*A Christian View of Image*

Some cultures, notably Islamic and Upanishadic Hindu, make little use of images. Christianity, by contrast uses them

freely and provides an understanding of the meaning of image at a number of different levels. At the first, the most basic, level mankind is created in the image of God: therefore his very identity is bound up in the authenticity of image. The second is apparent in the incarnation; when Jesus stated, "He who has seen me has seen the Father". He was underlining His power to reveal God to us in a deeper way even than that conveyed by the word, 'image'. Furthermore, central to the Christian revelation is the principle that that which is unseen can be revealed by that which is seen. In this fundamental sense the image is an inherent part of a Christian world view.

In addition, Scripture stresses the diversity and richness of the creation, and throughout its pages there is constant use of analogy, metaphor, simile and parable. Whether in the prophets, the Song of Solomon, Christ's teaching or the Letters, there is a complexity of imagery which underlines the vast resources of communication open to those who respond to the richness and multiformity of the creation. Those who take the parables of Jesus seriously cannot limit imagery to mere representation. As Rookmaker puts it:

Truth in art does not mean doing accurate copies, but that the artist's insight is rich and full, that he really has a good view of reality, that he does justice to the different elements of the aspect of reality he is representing. Truth has to do with the fulness of reality, its scope and meaning.<sup>1a</sup>

Thus a proper understanding of the creation gives a framework within which the maker of an image experiences great freedom, assuming, of course, that he is responsible to the truth and to the norms of the creation order, for images can be false and evil as well as true.

The false and evil image in its primary sense is disclosed to us by the absolute prohibition of the Second Commandment.

You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them.  
(Ex. 20: 4)

It is generally understood that this is not a prohibition of images as we have defined them. The meaning is that no image of anything within the creation is to be made which usurped God's position as Creator and Lord. Anything which is made an object of worship, or a religious integration point, or is a lie against God. An image which is believed to have intrinsic meaning, like the golden calf, is a false focus in people's lives. This

implies that images which accrue false significance to themselves, which fail to recognise their inferior position before God, are a lie. We realise that a totem, seen as a guardian spirit, a mask representing an ancestral identity, a fertility goddess and a temple idol are all in this basic sense pagan, but it is more than possible that a whole range of contemporary images are totemic and pagan. This is a possibility we shall examine later.

A second way in which there is a potential for evil in images lies in what the Bible describes as the vain imaginations of the hearts of men. Image making is an area where man faces few constraints imposed by his environment. Indeed a great deal of the image technology in recent years has been directed to removing the few constraints which do exist. It could be claimed that one of the main motives behind artistic development this century has been the impossible goal of pure creation. Pure creation would mean independence of the Creator which is the humanist's goal. But in fact every artist, himself made by God, must work with God's raw materials. Nevertheless, the potential freedom offered gives great scope for the imagination of man. But although this 'creativity' is often assumed to be a virtue in itself, it is the product of sin-affected minds, and needs to be viewed critically. Many art movements, notably Surrealism and Dada, have authenticated whatever can be imagined or associated. A Christian perspective shows this to be a false step.

A third way in which the Scriptures underline the potential evil of images is in relation to their makers. Insofar as the maker of an image is able to get a following for what he has made, his power is increased. Indeed, one of the abiding sins of the priestly class of all cultures is that they seek to increase their power by manufacturing idols and images. It is such a power struggle that takes place on Mount Carmel between Elijah and the prophets of Baal and Ashtorah. To create a successful image means power (how much we shall see later) and this brings into question the motives of the image maker. If the image is worshipped, how much more significant is the person who makes the image, the puppeteer who holds the strings, the producer who gets the hit. In this sense, too, images are open to perversion.

This cursory vista gives us some basic insights into the true meaning and potential misuses of images. They are not to be taken casually; as Revelation chapter 13 shows, they are going to be of world-wide significance. However, before we come to examine our situation, a number of issues need clarification, especially in view of the complex image-making process in contemporary British society.

*The Philosophy of the Image*

What we have said leads us immediately to some important conclusions. The first is that image making is *normative*. Rookmaker states it thus:

The norms for art are in fact basically no different from the norms for the whole of life. Art belongs to human life, is part of it, and obeys the same rules. The fact that the artist must keep in mind the specific structures of art is the same as anyone else in other human activities must do: the government has to work within the structures of the state, the motorist within the structures of the way the car works and the rules of the road. But whether you are an artist, a politician or a motorist you must apply not only the specialized structures of your own field of operations but also the structure of the whole of life, the fact that, being human, man is designed to work in a particular way, and that only by being wholly true to humanity will each activity really fulfil its purpose.<sup>1b</sup>

Thus the image maker not only has to fulfil norms in creating images - technical ones, aesthetic ones, honesty, respect etc., but he also has to fulfil norms in the areas which form its subject matter. Is a film which glamourizes promiscuity violence or mere activity being true to its subject matter? What about the relationship between the filmed act of violence and the unfilmed permanent injury, fear, distrust, retaliation, and sense of violation which result from it? There is no area where the image creator is not subject to norms.

A second point is that all images have a religious direction or meaning. Their creation is an act of faith. Even a holiday snapshot implies a great deal; normally it involves a commitment to family continuity and history, and also ('Smile, please'), the idea that holidays must be fun. Images have layers and layers of meaning built into them. They embody many different levels of truth and falsehood. Moreover, the images which do not give glory to God and respect His creation are, at some levels at least, creating lies.

It is also possible to see the way in which major conflicts within the arts can be resolved by a Christian perspective. For example, one of the main tensions in modern art has been between abstraction and realism. There seems no hope of reconciling these polar approaches to image making. But why are they in tension? The reason, I suggest, is that advocates of both abstraction and realism are looking for an absolute source of meaning within art on which they can build.<sup>2</sup> Abstractionists,

in hoping to create some pure form on which the heart of man can rest, belie the fact that God is the source of all meaning. Conversely, realists, make a fetish of objects in themselves and hoping thereby to create a self-subsistent environment, enact a lie. Both approaches result from a religious drive to find some kind of ultimacy apart from God, but this kind of autonomy is impossible. Only if this is recognised, is there a freedom to use visual languages of varying degrees of abstraction, depending on what the artist or image-maker wants to communicate. He is not tied, any more than Christ himself was tied, to a strict representationalism, realism or purist abstraction. The normative framework actually provides great practical freedom.

It is also necessary to understand the relationship between the *content* of an image and the *motives* that led to its formation. The two are intrinsically related: the latter necessarily affect the former. An image which is shaped by the motives of self-glorification, money making and manipulation will differ from one shaped by neighbourly love in its *content*. It is not possible to have pure art, or art for art's sake, because the context of art and image is always neighbourly love or its absence. Moreover, this affects the way an image communicates.<sup>3</sup> Here I want to introduce a distinction which develops this point. Communication, visual or otherwise, is *transparent* if the motives that led to it are loving, open and honest. On the other hand it is *opaque* if the motives are hidden, selfish and conflicting with what is actually communicated. My conclusion later will be that modern image creation is tending to become more and more opaque.

Finally we note a few further points more briefly. There is a problem of *misinterpretation* by the receiver of the image, especially where the visual language used is not shared. Can most viewers handle the visual conventions surrounding a documentary, the news, drama, or current affairs programmes? Electronic images create especial problems in this area. Further, images have a *range*, the number of people who receive them, *permanence*, the time period over which they can be viewed, *status*, the importance attached to them, and *geography*, the context in which they occur. With this introduction we move on to consider the place of images in our society.

#### *Historical Development*

The production of a still image was a manual operation until well after the Industrial Revolution: only in 1877 was a moving image developed; not until after the Second World War were colour images widespread, and it is under twenty years since colour television first appeared in Britain. In comparison with many other areas the technological development of imagery has been very recent. Its impact has been more recent still. Film was

important during the interwar years as a cultural force, but it is only with the growth of television, the dominant form, that the average person has experienced the level of exposure to images which is now regarded as normal. Key developments were the introduction of commercial television in 1955, BBC 2 in 1964, and the lifting of restrictions on the hours of broadcasting in 1972 which resulted in a tripling of BBC output within a decade.<sup>4</sup> This growth is very rapid and recent. The technology is one which allows mass production, and only now with cable television and videorecorders are the constraints on choice beginning to disappear. So recent are these developments that it is scarcely possible to begin to analyse the effects of the change. Not only is the image newly dominant, but the instantaneous image which has taken root within the home has overtaken all other forms. The average person will now spend at least seven solid years of his total life-span in front of a flickering screen. What therefore, is the significance of the image in the life of 1970 British citizens? Let us isolate some crucial aspects of the content of the television image.

#### *The Content of the Image*

(a) *The Vicarious Life.* The commitment to the visual image during a large proportion of the day time which is free from obvious constraints like school and work is an expression of preference for *living within those images* rather than just living. As Raymond Williams showed, the medium of television has a heavy bias towards programmes which are fictional and offer various forms of vicarious living to the audience. In 1965 he estimated that 38.5% of BBC and 51.7% of ITV's output was fiction.<sup>5</sup> Although many of the programmes are Westerns, Crime and Adventure films, many also are concerned with domestic and social life which offer regular entertainment and undemanding experience of *other* people's lives. The ITV Guide for 1974 describes them thus:

The television serial may gain the attention and loyalty of viewers because of an abiding interest in other people's lives. But one of the side effects, not without special value, is to bring their attention to problems about which they may have been aware but not previously regarded as being of significance to their own lives and attitudes.<sup>6</sup>

What is the significance of this regular dose of vicarious living? One outcome is that viewers are regularly provided with images of people with whom they can easily relate. The television characters are undemanding, consistent, entertaining, constantly facing new situations, amusing and understandable. They are a perfect retreat from the greater complexities and pressures which

many people actually face. Indeed, a German study suggested that when television was withdrawn, there was more tension, quarrelling and physical aggression in the home.<sup>7</sup> Here, then, is a 'solution' to difficulties in social relationships. Another aspect of this regular escape pattern is the fuel it provides for daydreaming. Although it is almost impossible to do comparative studies of the streams of consciousness which people experience,<sup>8</sup> it is undoubtedly true that the images and visual experiences which are available to the modern viewer are so extensive that his ability to fantasize through life is enormously extended. He is continually provided with images belonging to others and of the situations which face them and so is extracted from the life God has actually given him to live. There must already exist on a massive scale a pattern of alienation from day to day existence which is predicated on these vicarious images.

(b) *Epistemology of the television Image.* A great deal of television output is intended to convey knowledge, information and understanding. The news, documentaries, quizzes, features, outside broadcasts and other 'factual' programmes have this as an obvious aim, but most programmes aim somewhere to convey something of wisdom and knowledge. What kind of knowledge do these programmes tend to convey? What are the theories of knowledge to which they give credence? The issue is complex and its examination in depth would require a book. However, there are some tentative points which can be suggested. The first is that television is weighted towards *positivism*, not automatically, but because the producer is keen to exploit to the full the visual, the presentation of sense data. Let us take an innocuous example. For Einstein's centenary BBC 2 presented a special programme, starring Peter Ustinov, expounding the special and general theories of relativity. Visual simulations of the theories were produced using motorcycles on the lonely ranchlands of Texas — seeing was believing, although the actual predictions of these theories are testable only at the limits of astronomical vision. Or another innocuous example. On the news a comment is made about ambulancemens' pay, and a picture of an ambulance is shown. Or another innocuous example from *The Radio Times*: "The naked truth about Teacher's" is written beside a large picture of a bottle denuded of label. The appeal, steady and ubiquitous, is to the image as a standard for authenticity. Of course, television is a visual medium; that is not the point. The point is that when visual sense data are made the key to knowledge and understanding, then the medium is projecting a certain kind of faith, a positivist one. The fact that positivism as a philosophical position was completely discredited in the 30's does not affect the faith that is transmitted. The lie that *seeing is believing* is conveyed in a hundred different subtle ways each day to most people in Britain. We recall Jesus' words to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet believe." (John, 20: 29).



Another important element in the epistemology of television, is rooted in the attempt by these public bodies to be *neutral*. The way neutrality is attempted in many situations is through the bracketing of experience associated with the phenomenology of Husserl and Schutz. The emphasis in phenomenology is on the neutral description of subjective attitudes and orientations to the world. It is a positivism of subjective states of affairs. But it is also a retreat into pseudo-neutralism. The statement, 'X is a lying hypocrite' is open to dispute, and would probably produce a polemical reaction, but the statement that Y said X was a lying hypocrite is merely saying what is the case. It is easily possible for television to retreat into statements of the latter kind, and thereby avoid the important issue of whether X was ..... Does this happen? One of the major differences between our normal social lives and what faces us on the screen, is that we are accustomed to people actually looking at us and talking to us. The communication is direct and we listen and agree or disagree. But on the screen this is relatively rare - newsreaders, programme introducers, lecturers, the occasional politician or vicar and the weathermen would be the main examples. On television there are by contrast many bracketed or packaged 'neutral' images. Again there is no straightforward way of establishing the extent to which this bracketing takes place, or its significance. It is relevant that the structure of television rests on a strong body of professional mediators who largely monopolise the process of image creation and regularly package the units that are transmitted to the public. Insofar as this group is intending to make programmes which are interesting and entertaining, it is likely that attitudes, beliefs and views will be bracketed more and more firmly. An example of this process was supplied by Dr. David Martin in relation to a programme on which he was asked to appear.

'In each of these programmes, 15 people are to be offered an average of 1 minute 50 seconds each to opine on the armed forces, sex and the family, religion, education, drugs and so on. The young sociologist by whom I was approached concerning this series has assured me it is to attempt a much more profound probing of the issues than has been normal practice hitherto.'<sup>9</sup>

There may be other reasons why the proportion of floating voters in Britain has increased since the Second World War from under ten percent to over thirty, but I suggest that this bracketing, the new technique of agnosticism, is one of the main reasons for the fall in political commitment. That there should be a similar effect on religious conviction is also likely.

(c) *The Images of Humanism.* It is obviously not the case in our culture that there are graven images and idols in the old biblical sense. The chief religious commitment of today is to the worship of mankind, his achievements, attributes, intellect, emotions, personalities. It is with the mundane day to day glorification of man in mind that a high proportion of television images are created. Consider the meaning of most television props and scenarios. Consider the apparatus of star and personality development. Consider the emphasis on achievement. In one evening's viewing we are presented both with a skater, who "if he can conquer his nerves, he'll conquer the world" and an artist whose "talents are recognised and celebrated in America, but he hasn't met with the success he deserves at home in England."<sup>10a</sup> A group of people, a new class, is constantly being groomed to appear as the new interpretation of humanity. The basis of the appeal of this group varies; it may be sociability, security, intimacy, popularity, charisma, humour or notoriety, but usually the image conveys something of the success of humankind. The message is not simple nor is it direct. It is certainly not co-ordinated and consistent. It is partly the absence of untidyness, tiredness and the inability to cope. It is partly the extensive number of glamorous guardian angels. It is also the fact that the elite is being watched by so many viewers, and that time is managed with such expertise. (Why do you respond with such euphoria when an announcer is left holding a technical hitch?). It is also partly the extent to which praise is so important in the medium. The argument is that the implicit humanism of so many of these images does great harm, that it destroys the truth about many aspects of people's lives and leaves them with illusions. The definition of happiness, success, conscience, variety, and life which they receive will in the end let them down.

An obvious aspect of this development is the way the image has both ignored its own normative constraints and important Christian norms. When man is his own master, he makes the rules and changes them. The masters of the image claim that they can show whatever is the case, often on the basis of the phenomenological argument already presented - the producer who films violence or sex is merely recording that which is the case, and he is therefore neutral with respect to the subject matter or the actions which he portrays. What has effectively happened is that all kinds of human activity hitherto regarded as wrong have been dramatized and explored by the image in a way which has glorified them, and the process of glorification of human actions of various kinds has been used to destroy norms. Further, as we shall consider soon, one of the main problems in this area is that the communication is opaque.

A further aspect of humanism which, it would be argued, is being developed by image on television is a new conception of human relationships. The emphasis, often tacit, of a lot of programmes is on the ability to handle relationships, to act in such a way that relationships can be successfully negotiated. The underlying assumption is that each individual is out for himself, and that his social life is a matter of expertise in relating to and handling other people. The emphasis is many-sided; partly it arises because the images constantly portrayed on television are of social interaction - many of the more intimate aspects of life like privacy, rest, memory, prayer, thinking, quietness, meditation, solitary work, learning, reading, preoccupation etc. are visually suppressed, because they do not provide the interest needed to maintain viewing levels. Another aspect of the emphasis grows from the fact that actors and media people are employed most of the time on the screen; their expertise lies in 'acted' relationships, and this is implicitly the norm that is held up for emulation. It is relatively infrequently that ordinary people appear on programmes, and very rarely that they do so without being drafted into a prepackaged slot, delivered to the audience by a Bruce Forsyth or a Terry Wogan. Television also emphasises the other-directed response; it is what the audience thinks which matters - the collective twenty million or so are the arbiters of how a person or a performer is to be judged. Thus the whole pressure of the image tends to be to the horizontal relationship; indeed it will not strike many people that this is anything but normal, anything but what must be the case. In the limited scope of this paper we cannot look at the different aspects of this commitment, but we note that the perspectives of role playing and acting have even been taken up by sociologists as definitive frameworks of analysis.<sup>11</sup>

What is conveyed in image after image is thus the depths of a religious perspective which glorifies man, which develops its own norms and which proclaims that he is arbiter in relationships. Most people are beyond questioning that this perspective might be false.

(d) *The Entertaining Image.* The guiding norm for the formation of images is not truth or love, but *entertainment*. What does this mean? Essentially, it is a contractual situation where the people entertained pay the entertainer, while *he provides them with what he thinks they want*. Sometimes the position has been rather precarious, as with the medieval jester. More recently audiences have been able to vote with their feet by going to or staying away from places of entertainment. An important aspect of the idea of entertainment is that it does not involve full communication in two significant ways. First, the entertainer is giving to the audience what he *thinks* they want to hear, but he is not sure because the audience has very limited means of

communication available — clapping and booing were possible in the pre-electronic age, but now it is limited to the rather futile gesture of throwing one's boot at the screen. Thus the entertainer *constructs* a picture of what the audience wants. Today, there are a range of techniques of audience research and measurement to try to establish this picture, but, as the Viewers and Listeners Association quite rightly maintains, they are most inadequate. The reason they are so is that they are based upon the concept of MASS response, rather than attempting to differentiate the audience; communication from audience to entertainer is thus passive and weak. But second, the entertainer is not communicating either; he is giving the audience what he thinks *they* want to hear or see. The point is made by a British comic in the Radio Times.

Despite the political content of his act, he remains uncommitted. "I'm in the middle; I let them get on with it. It's not like in the States where you get Warren Beatty campaigning for the Democrats and Frank Sinatra for the Republicans. You have to remain neutral if you're in showbusiness in Britain.<sup>10b</sup>

You have to remain neutral or you risk losing a large section of your audience. The entertainer is thus always performing for his audience to varying degrees, not communicating with them in the sense of conveying truthfully what he wants to pass on to others. The differences between entertainment and communication is thus important and affects the whole process of transmission.

I have argued elsewhere that television should be primarily a medium for communication, and that the actual structure of BBC and ITV prevents this possibility from being realised.<sup>12</sup> What we have instead is the situation where the norm of entertainment has spread into all kinds of areas. The news is made entertaining, so are documentaries, discussions, sport and education. The implication is that the image creator must always go behind what is interesting in its own right to some of the viewers to entertain all of the viewers whether they are interested or not. The tyranny of the viewing figures makes perpetual entertainment necessary.

Moreover, this entertainment is manipulative at a more technical level. The people using television cameras, the film editors and the producers are experts at entertaining your eye. It will never be allowed to rest long enough to get bored. Changes of angle, lighting, the tempo of movement, scenery, subject, distance and focus will keep your eye occupied, whether your mind is or not. It is your eye that must be kept turned on. It is not impossible that the visual passivity which this kind of treatment implies is actually inhibiting people from seeing what

what is around them when their eyes are not continually being bombarded by visual stimuli.

Thus, it is possible that the norm of entertainment is fundamentally devaluing the content of television, not just in the sense that there are a lot of variety programmes, but in the deeper sense that what is entertaining is not allowed to be significant in its own right.

### *The Opaque Image*

These points about the content of television images have suggested that there are deep seated weaknesses in what is presented to the public on a very large scale. However, there are reasons for this, and they are to be found in the motives which direct the institutions concerned. The primary aim within the Independent Television Companies is to make money, which depends through the logic of advertising on large audiences. BBC, partly because it was conceived as a monopoly institution, and partly because it feels vulnerable if its audience drops below 40%, is also fundamentally committed to large audiences. There is therefore a continual attempt to influence the viewers control of the knob, or the remote control module, to stay watching, and to stay watching a particular programme. It is essentially a manipulative situation in which these motives cloud that which is being communicated. Consider, for example, the suspense formula; this is a straightforward technique which is used in film after film to keep the watcher glued to the set. However, realistic or gripping the suspense - will he fall off the side of the mountain? - the images are merely being used to hold the viewer; they are not *true*. In many other areas there are similar patterns of opaqueness and degeneration, but there is no institutional channel for criticism, for the validation of the system is viewing figures, and the whole system is geared to maintaining those at a level which automatically preempts criticism. How can such programmes and images be false when they are watched by such a high proportion of the British public?

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