

American Dream/American Nightmare – Image and Ideology.

One of the most highly artificial-looking shots in the book is of Donald and Melania Trump, shot in 2006, when Melania was pregnant. She is mounting a stair into a private jet, in a gold bikini and dark glasses, her belly huge.

Trump sits in a gull-winged Mercedes sports car on the runway. It is a picture of extreme materialism. The man is showing off a lot of expensive possessions, and one of them is his wife. She even appears to have the same metallic sheen as his machines.

And yet Leibovitz says it was not created as an attempt to mock. "It looks like a big production but it wasn't," she says. "I met the Trumps on the tarmac as they were heading back to New York.

Their plane was there. I wasn't planning on shooting the plane. It was just interesting how the back door opened up and it kind of looked like God knows what you were entering, with motors on both sides ... and it literally just came together. It's like these are found objects."

The Trumps loved the image.

The 1934 Soviet Congress outlined these as the prescribed elements of Socialist realism. The principles are thought to have been sanctioned directly by Josef Stalin himself:

- 1. Proletarian: art relevant to the workers and understandable to them.**
- 2. Typical: scenes of everyday life of the people.**
- 3. Realistic: in the representational sense.**
- 4. Partisan: supportive of the aims of the State and the Party.**

‘Some day we shall no longer need pictures: we shall just be happy.’ — Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter, 1966

Founders of the Capitalist Realism movement

Capitalist Realism:

The image, as with its 'Socialist realist' counterpart, perpetuates dominant ideas – or an ideology. Advertising borrows from art, indeed, from everything, and when Richard Prince, Victor Burgin or Barbara Kruger borrow, or directly copy, the motifs of advertising, do they interrogate the underpinnings of the dominant ideology represented, or do they conform to it. Are they subordinates of an ideology that rather cleverly persuades us it is not an ideology – it is a system to which an alternative is unimaginable.

Perhaps there is instead a symbiosis: artist critiquing capitalism adoption of the image, as a replacement for the real – representation as wish-fulfillment – is problematic. Its association with the Debordian concept of detournment – a transgressive appropriation

Mark Fisher published *Capitalist Realism* in 2009 – which is telling, a year after the global financial crash. The 2008 financial crash, rather than shaking the foundations of the capitalist system, seemed to reinforce it. To the extent that marketisation dominates all aspects of society including areas such education and health that, even in the 1980s were kept very much as a province of state control. Capitalist realism to Fisher was an “invisible barrier constraining [alternative] thought and action”.

It should be noted that the similar 1929 Wall Street Crash ultimately led to The New Deal in America, the Welfare State in Britain (and similar systems in other western countries). 2008 gave us 'austerity'.

His influences here are Gramsci, Althusser and Debord.

As Jörg M. Colberg puts it in his review of Leibovitz's book,

"If we accept that Leibovitz's and Crewdson's photographs are obverse and reverse of the same coin, we might as well spell out how Leibovitz's depictions of the wealthy and successful in heroic, vaguely fascist poses is related to Crewdson's depictions of the rest in non-heroic, dejected poses. It's the country's underlying myth that sustains, no: necessitates the celebrity pictures. You cannot, after all, maintain the illusion of a country where you will enjoy success if you work hard enough without showing that this is in fact achievable, even though the contradictory mystique of unattainability is part of their function.

Back to these pictures, though. Again, the fact that some of those in the book did (and still do) work hard is beside the point. Given that those who didn't work very hard still get the same treatment erases whatever distinction could be made. Plus, any actual heroes, such as someone who ran into a burning building to save a child, say, are completely absent from the book. It is, in other words, ideology more than anything else, an ideology that cannot be sustained without a heavy reliance on photographic effect, a celebration and re-affirmation of capitalism, which is the driving force behind the country's myth."

Further on . . .

“Much like Socialist Realism, Capitalist Realism aims at visually overwhelming the viewer, to celebrate its underlying ideology, while preventing a viewer from considering any alternative. Aesthetically, there are many similarities, while the underlying ideologies couldn’t be any more different. But as I noted in the very beginning, the key is that a clever application of the right aesthetic can easily work towards bypassing a viewer’s critical thinking, regardless of what political system a viewer lives in. As we have learned over the past couple of years, there simply is no guarantee that in a democracy, tools will only be used only to further democratic progress. That’s why even in a democracy we need to carefully look at how pictures are made and used.”

Jörg M. Colberg

Conscientious Photography Magazine

Though Wang Guangyi's work has erroneously been associated with Chinese Political Pop, in reality one of the main themes of his art can be found in its relationship to the transcendent.

Juxtaposing revolutionary images with consumer logos, Wang's canvases provoke with their duplicitous message, highlighting the conflict between China's political past and commercialised present. Stylistically merging the government enforced aesthetic of agitprop with the kitsch sensibility of American pop, Guangyi's work adopts the cold-war language of the 60s to ironically examine the contemporary polemics of globalisation. Through his critique, Guangyi's paintings weave intricate narratives, implicating the role of the artist as an active participant (both as subjugator and subservient) in economic and social policy.

Guangyi treads a very delicate line between moral dictum and capitalist endorsement; the interpretation of his paintings alternates with the subjectivity of context.

Amalgamating, confusing, and blurring opposing ideological beliefs, Guangyi's billboard sized canvases readily sell out national valour, while simultaneously devaluing status symbol luxury for the proletariat cause.

To what extent do we empathise with Crewdson's fictions of a downtrodden, uneasy, semi-rural America? These may be people he is familiar with, including family and friends, yet they are presented not as personally troubled individuals, trapped in an existential crisis, more as cyphers for his own fabulation of a non-existent, fairy-tale America.

Despite Colberg's argument that Crewdson presents a converse to Leibovitz's celebration of American (and visually fascistic) values, presenting the people of small town Americana, downtrodden; victims of the vicissitudes of the reverse side of the American Dream coin flip, to Leibovitz's obverse.

Yet, with their nods to the uncanny, the visual tropes of sci-fi cinema and Hollywood production values, Crewdson's images seem to valorise their participants much as do Leibowitz's, albeit with less surface glamour and spectacle. The reality presented is far from the documentary realism of Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Paul Strand, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Robert Frank, Berenice Abbott, Lisette Model, Diane Arbus, Eugene Richards, Dana Lixenberg etc.

Both Leibowitz and Crewdson present a fantasy vision of the United States utilizing similar production values – one for commerce, the other for art (that is itself a form of commerce).

Andreas Gursky

Gursky's work has no implied criticism of the global capitalism he depicts. He explores a world that already seems an artificial representation, a Debordian spectacle that overwhelms. Not only does he depict a hyperreality, he goes further by making it more so, using digital manipulation. If a billion-dollar motor-racing track built in the desert of Bahrain does not seem an absurd extravagance, his transformation of it onto an impossibly sinuous collection of corners that could only be taken within a vivid imagination, accelerates reality beyond the rev-limit.

The '**Mass ornaments**' – People and products in 'total designs', evident in Gursky's Hyperspace.

Siegfried Kracauer

Other Notes:

"The Spectacle is capital...accumulated to the point where it becomes image."

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

The critic, Raymond Williams (Advertising: The Magic Kingdom, Verso

[1980]) calls advertising:

“The official Art of modern capitalist society.”

Michael Schudson: Capitalist Realism is the visual language of advertising. (1980)

Fragmentary universe – a sense of entropy present in Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall’s work

An American vernacular is disrupted by an unspecified uncanny happening outside yet evident within the frame.

Photography is historically linked to the growth of capitalism; it is a child of capitalism:

“A model of capitalist growth in the nineteenth century”

John Tagg

Mark Fisher K-Punk (collected writings)

Is detournment different from recuperation; is this dependent on context; are effigies of capitalism an affirmation of their source, even when seemingly critical.

