

# FOREVER INSIDE IMAGES

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I'm not saying that the image has lost its ability to negate and critique the commodity world. That would be going too far. But confronted with the events that took place in Washington on 6 January, 2021, it is difficult *not* to feel that a previous language of transgression has finally been rendered obsolete or turned upside-down, as people protest what they perceive as the slow dismantling of white democracy in the US. "Our vote was stolen" as a farcical "stabbed in the back" fascist trope, now in the form of a conspiracy about paedophile rings, blood rituals and politicians. The sight of Braveheart-dressed Trump supporters, armed camouflage-clad fascist militias and middle-aged men in hoodies with QAnon insignia storming the Capitol was truly a strange sight to behold. The whole thing, from the not-so-secret online planning to the scuffle with the clearly understaffed and uncoordinated police force—who made only cursory attempts to prevent the angry mob from entering the Senate and then simply stood aside, much to the bewilderment of the rioters—the whole thing was unreal. The US, global superpower, was experiencing what looked like a prelude to civil war in the heart of its capital city. But as with the whole of the Trump presidency, it never looked like the real thing—a real coup or *putsch*. It was so silly, so bizarre. Even the protesters who ended up inside the Capitol Building seemed surprised, choosing to livestream their break-in, more tourists than rioters or the vanguard of a new/old order intent on crushing the political system and restoring a national community.

But it was real, of course. Many of the folks who stormed the Capitol truly believed they could somehow save the Trump presidency by disrupting the joint session of Congress in which Biden's victory was to be formalised. Some clearly came intending to lynch certain members of Congress—AOC, of course, Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer, but also Mike Pence, who proved unwilling to save Trump. Despite the participants' willingness to believe that they are predisposed to be part of the colonial settler majority/minority that runs the country, or even to believe in conspiracy theories about baby-blood-drinking Democrats, the event had the look of something not quite fully realised. It seemed

like a prelude to something that would perhaps never take place or could only take place online or in some racist fantasy world. *Ersatz* all over. The whole thing had the same sense of superficiality and idiotic hollowness that characterised the Trump presidency from beginning to end—from the announcement of his candidacy on the golden escalator in Trump Tower in 2015 to his grim inauguration speech, during which he painted a picture of betrayal and promised a fascist reckoning. Naturally, on both occasions, Trump was lying. On the escalator, he began his announcement by saying, “Wow. Woah. That is some group of people. Thousands.” In fact, there were fewer than a hundred people, including journalists. After the inauguration, his administration continued to insist that more people had attended his inauguration than Obama’s. Trump would always supplement his bragging and lies with angry tirades against foreigners: “Mexico is sending rapists to America” or “China is stealing American jobs.” He was indeed the Dada president, offering buffoonery and nonsense as a response to the 40-year-long slow crash-landing of American capitalism that exacerbated inequality exponentially, leaving more and more Americans unable to reproduce unless they had access to credit. This is the “material” side of the present crisis. Capitalism is excluding more and more people who are simply superfluous to an economy incapable of gaining momentum, incapable of generating profit, while the rich use political means to extend and hoard their wealth.

Trump and the other fascist politicians represent attempts to control this situation. The bourgeoisie is disunited and has no new plan. Trump, Le Pen, Salvini, Bolsonaro and all the others act as rallying points, able to prevent uprisings, riots and occupations from gaining ground. They represent an “autonomisation” of the political, where fascists mobilise a fractured public sphere through hatred and fear-mongering. The racism and xenophobia might be slightly over the top, always in danger of being too absurd to work, but in our present influencer culture, nothing seems too ludicrous. No imagined community seems too implausible.

When contemplating the sheer unreality and incoherence of it all, we should, of course, remember that interwar European fascism had a strange eclectic and exaggerated appearance. As Benjamin and Bloch were quick to point out, this was fascism as a flight from reality. Fascism is by definition awkward, as it brings together seemingly disparate phenomena. When Hitler and his cohorts staged a coup attempt in Munich in 1923, surrounding the venue where the interim state commissioner Gustav Kahr was

giving a speech, the whole thing quickly went down the drain, as Hitler and his cohorts did not really have a plan for what to do next. Kahr simply refused to comply, and Hitler was forced to release him. Hitler ended up marching around central Munich with his small army of 2,000 SA stormtroopers before stumbling across a regiment of soldiers that opened fire. Hitler escaped, only to be arrested a few days later and thrown in jail. The Beer Hall Putsch was undoubtedly a farce—as Ian Kershaw writes in his *Hitler* biography, “the night took a shambolic course”—but it nonetheless ended up as a mobilising myth for the National Socialists, something to which they would continuously hark back. The rest is history. A decade later, the NSDAP gained power. This time, in 2021, the situation is beyond farcical, involving in the words of Mike Davis, “a big biker gang dressed as circus performers”. The storming of the Capitol was poorly planned, the groups involved undisciplined and disparate. What was the mass break-in supposed to achieve? Like the Beer Hall Putsch, the sheer idiocy of it is not necessarily a problem. The storming could be a test, a charivari as Laleh Khalili was quick to point out, a dress rehearsal of things to come. Late-capitalist fascism is not going away soon.

The best description is probably that the event was absurd. But even that does not really seem fitting. Calling it absurd points to a time when politics made at least some kind of sense. It brings to mind opposing parties, plans and programmes, a united bourgeoisie, national interests and a working class trying to force capital to give concessions, make compromises, or slowly digging holes to undermine the established system. It was a world in which people came together in temporary associations characterised by relatively coherent ideologies. That world now seems very far away. The storming of the Capitol almost renders the word “absurd” devoid of its previous meaning. No logic or political meaning unfolded on the steps of the Capitol. Mass parties, neighbourhoods and families have all been replaced by social media, a term in which the word “social” has also been hollowed out.

The sheer silliness of the whole thing is staggering and points to the slow but continuous hollowing out of politics. In this process of hollowing out, the question of images is central—or, more precisely, the *organisation* of images is a decisive feature. Here, Guy Debord remains the primary reference, in particular his description of the way capitalist society has become a society of the spectacle. We inhabit a global social totality in which images

mediate social existence to such an extent that all we can see is the images we produce on all the different image machines we have at our disposal, on the ever-present screens in our pockets, which dominate our lives. The images spread by these machines are increasingly inane, exhorting us to “Buy this” or “Eat that.” These image-promises know that they are entirely false and likely to be replaced by new ones within days, hours or even minutes. Sourdough and sneakers, TikTok and Facetune. The thinness of it all. Capitalism’s hold on its subjects thrives on the destitute nature of its promises, and it is working to perfection. We all walk around constantly looking down at the electronic image machines in our hands. Everything might be in a state of collapse, but the system is in place. And it’s working like magic. Crisis and renewal. We consume images faster and faster. Every single day, more than 3.2 billion images are shared on social media. In 2020, 95 million images were shared on Instagram every day, 350 million on Facebook, not to mention the various Chinese platforms. It can best be described as a kind of addiction or a cult. Capitalism is, as Benjamin wrote, “an essentially religious phenomenon” on which we cannot get a grip. It is not possible to close the net in which we are caught.

Appearance is all. The global social totality eludes us. The armed breach of the US Capitol showed that the fascists, too, are subject to the conditions of the spectacle and not quite capable of mastering the realm of the image. They can unleash online hatred and trolling, but they are not quite able to transform a virtual Armageddon into a real, material show of force that transcends the desperation of the seemingly endless parade of lone-wolf killers. Not yet, at least. Their online success seems mired in the “private” white violence from which it originated. Trump was an adman rather than a fascist leader, not quite capable of delivering on his promises—or perhaps he was not supposed to. His supporters dressed up as American frontiersmen roaming Congress, not quite sure what to do, and ended up taking Nancy Pelosi’s door plate as a souvenir. This is politics with no plan beyond memes and trolling. There’s a straight line from the events in Abu Ghraib in 2003 to the storming of the Capitol—the common-wo/man-asking-for-a-day, photographing themselves torturing prisoners or putting their feet up on Pelosi’s desk. This is where we are at now. In 2003, US soldiers took souvenirs from Saddam Hussein’s palace in Baghdad and snapped themselves in his bed. In 2021 Trump’s loyalists took selfies in the marbled halls of the seat of US Congress as Democrat and Republican senators alike fled.

Not that the fascists' inability to control appearances should somehow comfort us. The new cycle of protests takes place in the same image world. A massive wave of protests, riots and uprisings has swept the globe since 2010, but so far, they have not amounted to a revolutionary offensive. They have mainly been aimed at governments and their mishandling of economic crises and the pandemic. They somehow remain trapped in the realm of "politics", unable to penetrate the sphere of production. It is surely not just a question of identity, but the breakdown of a previous revolutionary vocabulary seems to have destined the new protest wave to stumble disjointedly from post to post, with the situation exploding in one place after another before quickly dying out or being brutally repressed. An international revolutionary offensive has yet to emerge.

The inevitable conclusion is, therefore, that while the image was once antagonistic and transcendent in relation to the prevailing order, it seems to have lost its "critical" dimension. All indictments are easily absorbed or transformed into something else. Nothing is too horrific or banal to become a meme or a Netflix series. Nothing cannot become an invitation to go shopping—even Carla Lonzi. Claire Fontaine's attempt to juxtapose revolutionary feminism and high-end fashion using Lonzi quotes as the backdrop to the autumn/winter 2020 Christian Dior fashion show in Paris can stand as a belated attempt to "be critical", injecting un-assimilable stuff into our all-inclusive influencer culture all the while knowing that's no longer possible. There seems to be no escape from the image world, and any opposition to the prevailing form of life has become ineffective. *Détournement* has lost its alienating power. We start from there.

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