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RONALD REAGAN

COMPUTER ANIMATION

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THE POLITICS
OF IMAGE
BY
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EXCLUSIVEINTERVIEW

by
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SPECIAL ISSUE:

ART & COMMUNICATION

RONALD REAGAN:

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What we know of Reagan, or any president for that matter, comes to us almost exclusively through structured events which are controlled and designed by the Office of the President's highly trained media advisers, experts in the field of image manipulation. These events include televised press conferences and speeches (usually carried on all three networks simultaneously); glimpses of the President and his spokesmen acting out the theater of government, covered on televised news; and, of course, photographs in the printed media. It is important to realize that these events are tightly choreographed to convey the appropriate message of the President.

ENTER THE PRESIDENT

Image politics is about morphology; that is, form and structure. Television is so well suited to Reagan's politics because he is best at conveying form, not content.

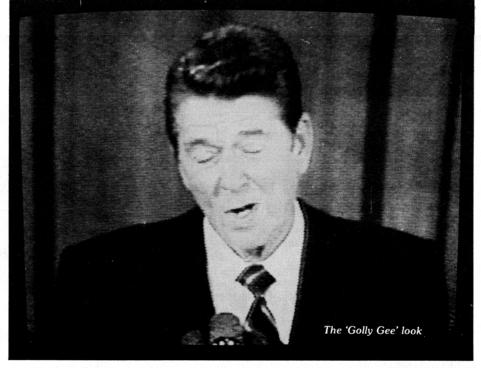
The press conference begins with two slow pans of the East Room of the White House. We, the viewers, have time to examine the situation. The room is opulent with its high ceilings, crystal chandeliers, and gold curtains, all suggesting formality and importance. The camera sweeps the press, both audience and participant, which is seated on metal chairs with red cushioned seats; while in the front, a man is affixing the Presidential seal to the lectern which is on a raised platform. Behind the lectern there is a royal blue curtain flanked by two flags. Television lights and cameras are directed toward the front of the room where several men stand stiffly, their arms crossed, staring out at the audience.



These are the Secret Service, protectors and symbols of the importance of the man about to enter the room, and reminders of the hazards of his office. The room and all contained within it are metaphors for the power of the Presidency. A voice off camera says: "Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States," and Ronald Reagan emerges through a door, preceeded and followed by aides and more agents. There is a general stir as everyone stands. With his entrance, the symbols converge onto the man himself. Ronald Reagan is both the symbol and the actualization of Presidential power. With his arrival the ingredients of metaphor and morphology are beautifully realized.

What are we shown of the man during the brief time it takes him to walk to the podium? Reagan knows the importance of an entrance, having made many of them before. His walk is sure and firm, that of a younger man in good health, which, on this occasion particularly, he must convey in order to assuage any doubts about his health following an assasination attempt. The posture of the head and shoulders is peculiar to Reagan, and, along with the slight but warm smile with which he acknowledges faces in the audience, conveys a hint of humble pride.

This is his 'golly gee' look which suggests humility and an endearing human vulnerability. It says, "Heck, I'm just like you, sort of." Reagan is, indeed, a character out of a Western movie, embodying all of the tender but tough mythology of Owen Wister's 'The Virginian' and the tall-in-the-saddle individualism of a Frederic Remington cowboy painting. His style, most of all, is relaxed and smooth, perfectly suited for television, a medium that magnifies and distorts jagged edges. This image is in direct contrast to a man like Nixon who, try as he might, could never conceal his self-conscious stiffness, the beads of sweat glistening on his upper lip. Nixon is an example of the content of the image finally destroying the illusion, a fatal flaw in this era of image politics.



SIGNIFIERS OF AMERICANISM

Ronald Reagan as President and media personality is brilliant at conveying the signifiers of Americanism. This is his greatest strength and the source of his political power. In his mannerisms, turns of phrase, gestures, and vocabulary, he projects to the public a wide range of human attributes which reflect the American ideal. We must understand that what is being discussed here is not what the man is actually like (something we can never know), but what he appears to be like. Reagan as image speaks to America's concept of uniquely American virtues.

What are these virtues and what are the signs Reagan uses to convey them? The virtues are: honesty, self-reliance, moral strength and courage, modesty, humor, confidence, human vulnerability or sensitivity, respect for others (particularly those less fortunate), friendliness, and good health and virility. The signs he uses to convey this information are evident in his general demeanor as reflected in his responses to particular questions during the October press conference.

Reagan is asked if his economic policies have the support of the poor and, more specifically, of the black population. He responds as follows: "I had one letter just a few days ago from a 16 year old boy who identified himself as black and he said, I am wholeheartedly behind what you are trying to do and I think it means much to my future."

The image conveyed is that Reagan has respect for others less fortunate and, particularly for blacks, the traditional American underclass. He is saying, "You see, I care. I'm listening. I even read letters from those kinds of people." It is important that Reagan convey this humanistic sense since Americans despise and fear any hint of the arrogant autocrat and will not tolerate it in their leaders (Nixon's fate being an example of the sin of blatant autocracy). A President may be despotic, but in this age of media scrutiny, it must be well concealed. If Reagan is an autocrat, it is snuggled beneath a veneer of folksy homily and signified good will.

But there are other things going on beneath what is immediately apparent. "I had a letter just a few days ago..." The head bows slightly. His eyes flutter as he looks out over the audience and into our living rooms. His mouth quivers with a subtle smile. The tone here is self-congratulatory. But this signifier is later amended by the bobbing of the head and the eyes turned downward to indicate naive innocence. This is a variation of the often used 'golly gee' look which has proven so successful for this President.

The reference to the letter is a theatrical device. Of course we have no way of knowing if he did or didn't receive this particular letter and are left to assume that he did since everything about Reagan signifies honesty. "A sixteen year old boy who identified himself as black." There is a noticeable pause between the words "boy" and "who," suggesting that Reagan is searching for the proper words. Although the words "boy" and "black" appear in the same sentence, he does not refer to the writer of the letter as a "black boy" which would be political suicide with its obvious racist implications. Nonetheless, his phrasing is self-conscious and euphemistic. It's almost like saying, 'I got a letter from a sixteen year old boy of the black persuasion.' There is an awkwardness here which, if not racist, at least conveys some racial discomfort. And yet the important point is that the general tone of the statement reflects what Reagan intended it to: I am a nice guy and care about those less fortunate.

Another example, this one also based on a letter. (Letters are a proof of veracity and also inspire confidence that anyone can speak to the President). Asked how Wall Street seemed to be reacting to his economic program, Reagan responds as follows: "I just thought someone would ask me about Wall Street." (Smiles broadly. Head bobbing. Tongue pressed against cheek. General laughter from the appreciative audience as he takes the letter out of his pocket). "And I have a letter here from a securities industry association signed by the president, Edward O'Brian and the chairman of the board, Ralph Denunzio." (Conveniently Irish and Italian surnames).



What is conveyed here is the President with a sense of humor. He is even playful. The letter which he then reads is very supportive, needless to say. It's important that he present it in this relaxed, almost comical way because his actions are transparently self-serving and, of course, this is the basis of the joke, a joke which is not particularly original but is effective through excellent timing and gesture. He never answers the question but diverts it through humor. After reading the letter, he looks up smiling broadly and says, "Well, I'm very grateful for that. I left out a few lines. Modesty caused me to do that."

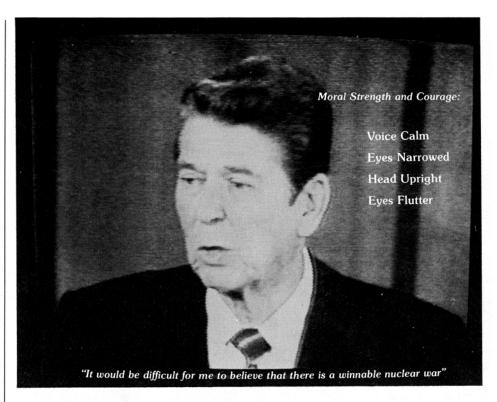
The image on the screen changes to a laughing audience and back to an amused President. This is vintage Reagan and it plays well across America's television sets. What is supposed to be an aggressive interrogation of the President by the press has turned into an harmonious gathering. "Modesty caused me to do that." He appears relaxed and in control.

Humor is one of his most effective and often used tools. It allows him to avoid difficult questions while seeming to be a nice guy. The question was difficult since it was common knowledge at that time that Wall Street was responding very poorly to 'Reaganomics.' Reagan knows how to work an audience and has been doing it for most of his life

And a final example: Reagan is asked if he believes there could be a 'winnable nuclear war.' His response: "It would be difficult for me to believe that there is a winnable nuclear war. But where our great risk falls is that the Soviet Union has made it very plain that among themselves they believe that it is winnable and believing that, that makes them constitute a threat and which is one of the reasons why I'm dedicated to getting them at a table, not for arms limitations talks but for arms reduction talks."

This statement is intended to signify moral strength and courage. The response is put into the most simplistic equation of good versus evil, a moralistic stand, one that he uses often and, which, being simplistic, is particularly suited to television, a medium not known for its ability to decipher subtle nuances. His voice is calm throughout and one can detect a sense of paternalistic resolve in the way he says certain words: "... the Soviet Union has made it very plain that among themselves they believe that it is winnable..." The head bows slightly; again the eyes flutter; the expression is intently serious; and the head rolls slightly from side to side as he says the words, "very plain," signifying dismay and realistic acceptance of an imperfect world.

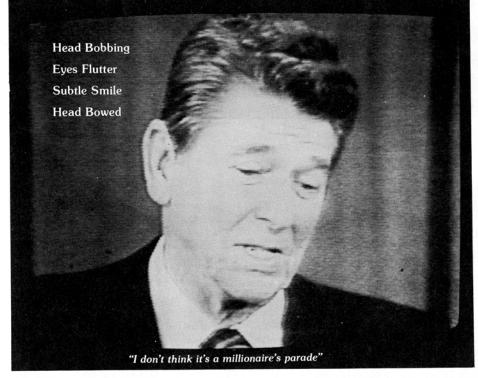
The Soviets are that imperfection: "...they believe that it is winnable...", and later, "...and that makes them constitute a threat..." Anti-Soviet rhetoric is hardly a new theme in American politics but it is particularly important to this administration, which uses the Soviet threat as a partial rationale for a major military buildup (two and a half trillion dollars being projected for 'Defense' over the next four years) at the expense of social service programs.



But, coming from Reagan, this attitude is smoothly articulated through the compounding of specific signifiers which key certain predictable responses in the American people, and not by means of logic or reasoned argument. No concrete evidence is summoned that proves the Soviets' belief in the "winnability" of nuclear war and, what is perhaps most important, none is asked for. His response is rhetorical, no answer at all but, rather, a studied performance communicating not substance or content but style and personality; and it works, nobody questioning it, least of all the media.

It would be wrong to suggest that there is no content to Reagan's policies, since the opposite is obviously true. His administration has been revolutionary in turning back the seemingly permanent programs which started with the New Deal and have, until now, been repeatedly re-confirmed by subsequent administrations.

What is at issue here is that his successes have not been the result of reasoned debate on policy through the media, which is the media's traditional role. To the contrary, the real issues, and the controversy surrounding them, have been cleverly obfuscated in media treatment by a personality which transmits well through television. Reagan commands Americans' acquiescence through the iconography of image archetypes, many of which he and we learned through television in the first place. Ironically, his clear-seeming projection actually muddles reality. Why there isn't any serious interrogation of this President by the media on the issues remains a troubling question. What we may be witnessing is the ultimate victory of form over content.



Reporter: "Mr. President, how do you respond to the accusations that your administration is a symbol of ostentations affluence at a time of economic hardship, with lavish parties, mink coats, and new china purchased at \$1000.00 a plate. That it is, in fact, a millionaire's parade."

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Reagan: "I don't think it's a millionaire's parade and I haven't counted any...the mink coats that have been around and but also you mentioned the china. Let's set that staight once and for all because Nancy's taken a bum rap on that. There has been no new china for the White House since the Truman administration. Some partial augmentation under Lyndon Johnson but not a full set of china. Now breakage occurs even in the White House. The truth is that at State Dinners we can't set the tables with dishes that match. We have to have a mix so don't look too closely at other tables. And this was the result of an anonymous contribution and the company making the china made it at cost. So there was nothing out of the taxpayers."

This article is from a lecture with video entitled, Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Image. It is an 'image study' based entirely on his press conference of October 1, 1981, the first day of the fiscal year and the official start of Reagan's new economic program. Since video tape of the actual press conference is used to illustrate numerous points during the lecture, the reader of this article is at a disadvantage. The photographs accompanying this text are intended to serve as a substitute for the video.

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