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# In the unthinking age, seeing is believing



By Christopher Caldwell

The written word is becoming the language of a scholarly establishment



**I**t might be easier to do something about North Korea's nuclear truculence if we could make head or tail of the cryptic videos it has been posting on the web. The latest shows a dreaming man, some Korean script and a video of rockets flying through space while fires burn in skyscrapers and a pianist plays "We Are the World" at dirge tempo. Is this a harmless fantasy? A thrown-down gauntlet? Should the west respond with

a statement? Should it post a video of its own? It is hard to know. Our traditional media are being "replaced" by the internet. But the "information" coming out of the information economy is often hard to decipher, and composed for purposes that are hard to discern.

The film academic Stephen Apkon argues in *The Age of the Image*, published this week, that it is possible to speak of a new kind of literacy, one built on figuring out such non-verbal messages. At its humblest level, his book is about the "language" of film, but Mr Apkon has a larger philosophical point, too. Our culture is growing more global. While it still relies on words, they are increasingly wrapped up with images, and it is the images people remember. Elizabeth Daley, dean of the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, believes writing today is like Latin on the eve of the Renaissance – the language of a scholarly establishment. YouTube clips and other visuals are the equivalent of vernacular Italian. They are the street language, and the medium for much new and creative thinking.

Images have always mattered in public arguments more than we admit. Few people cared that Richard Nixon won the 1960 presidential debates against John Kennedy, so unkempt did the Republican look. Mr Apkon quotes a neuroscientist who says people are so attuned to picking up subtle signals that they make decisions about whether they like or dislike politicians "immediately". And unsubtle, non-verbal messages with a great emotional wallop can now be broadcast more widely. Video of the shooting of Neda Agha-Soltan, captured during June 2009

protests against irregular Iranian elections, spread round the world. In the gut-wrenching *Kony 2012* video (100m views in six days), American activists sought to enlist the US military in a manhunt for a Ugandan warlord.

Eyesight is the most trusted sense, Mr Apkon notes, and that means we need to be careful with it. There is a standing danger that the public will grow so upset by images of mistreatment that it will demand the government send the army off to war. This is arguably what happened Somalia in 1992, with America's poorly planned military response to the African country's famine. In future, Mr Apkon says, we are likely to need "a combination of scepticism and incisiveness", enabling citizens to "[critique] what is put in front of them with some level of sophistication".

That is unlikely. When the passions provoked by visual imagery lead to the same conclusion as the logic of a verbal argument, people are generally comfortable coming to a decision. But when passion and logic are at odds, one of them must be favoured.

Until recently, it was the essence of statesmanship, scholarship and justice to purge strong emotion from our deliberations. Images today, though, are so plentiful and sharp that they dominate our thought processes. Although Mr Apkon relishes the immediacy of YouTube, he fears that political advertisers will soon be able to craft stories around "hidden mental hungers", easily manipulating voters.

Citizens tend to think about voting in one of two ways. First, you base your vote on your identity. You are a farmer, so you choose the candidate best disposed towards farmers. The second theory is that you vote on arguments, independent of identity. You believe a sales tax should replace income tax, so you vote for the candidate who shares that opinion. But today's image-based communication has little to do with identity or arguments. It has to do with the lowest-common-denominator traits that mark you as a human animal.

There is no obvious solution. Even if we acquire the scepticism Mr Apkon speaks of, certain institutions "go with" certain styles of perceiving, absorbing and interpreting information. You would not think that there was anything "Protestant" about the printing press. And yet the press seems to have been a prerequisite for Protestantism's rise. Likewise, our own democracies, imperfect though they may be, are the culmination of the culture of the written word. Mr Apkon notes how Kennedy, in those 1960 debates, "tapped into a lever in the psyche more primal than mere facts".

In retrospect, that was an ominous moment. Once you find that lever, isn't democracy bound to lose a bit of its appeal, rather like a detective story in which you have been told the ending?

*The writer is a senior editor at The Weekly Standard*