



Title

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Age of the Image

by Cal Revely-Calder • 30.07.2020

Age of the Image, a BBC–Open University documentary series on ‘how images have changed the modern world’, is elegant and absurd. Its presenter, James Fox, has chosen a topic beyond compass – the ‘history of image-making’ – and allotted it four sixty-minute chunks. The episode titles will give viewers a rough idea, but they flaunt their vagueness: ‘A New Reality’, ‘Power Games’, ‘Seductive Dreams’ and ‘Fake Views’. Collectively, the four instalments amount to a timeline of sorts: at the one end, the nineteenth century and its rudimentary cameras, and at the other, the ominous dawn of the social-media age. Along the way, we see works of art shaped by fascist intentions or sexual fantasies, but this is a tale told conversationally, with no more specific objective than to ‘connect some appealing dots’. ‘Power Games’, for instance, shuttles across the Atlantic: Riefenstahl and Dietrich, superhero comics **FIG. 1**, Robert Capa’s photographs, the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, Alfred Hitchcock, Ken Loach, the Moon landings and the work of Gordon Parks. Images, the viewer learns, represent power in different ways. It is either frustrating or nicely informal, depending on how much rigour you think you are owed.



Fig. 1 Still from ‘Power Games’, from the series *Age of the Image*, directed by Alexander Leith. 2020.

With no underlying principle to furnish it with a map, Fox’s journey is long and broad. After all, our phenomenal world depends on sight, so most of life, and therefore history, is a pictorial affair. But

Fox is never fazed. Here he is on the cobbles of Rome, strolling along as he talks about Federico Fellini's gorgeous films; there he is in the Ardèche, exploring the caverns of Chauvet. His details are on point, and his segues through topics are slick. He even wanders through the prairies of 'Marlboro country', chatting about TV advertising as some horses watch him pass FIG. 2.



Fig. 2 Still from 'Seductive Dreams', from the series *Age of the Image*, directed by Alexander Leith. 2020.

Fox is a dependable man: this much is clear from his black, well-fitted suit. In episode 3, while discussing the sensual reveries of post-war Italian cinema, he dons dark glasses, like Marcello Mastroianni FIG. 3. On TV, the template for art historians is either 'smoothie' or 'lovable mess'. Fox is the former kind, which distinguishes him from his mentor, Waldemar Januszczak. Take a scene from the BBC series *The Dark Ages* (2012), in which Januszczak visits the basilica of S. Sabina, Rome. Off goes 'Waldy' up the nave, bobbling about and waving his arms. As usual, he is dressed as though he crashed through a market stall. But that is the fun of his shtick: a flappy everyman appeal. Fox, by contrast, is strait-laced: pleasant and free of quirk. For the most part, it is effortless, and in *Age of the Image* it works.



Fig. 3 Still from 'Seductive Dreams', from the series *Age of the Image*, directed by Alexander Leith. 2020.

On the other hand, Fox's style can feel bloodless, too. Watching all four episodes back-to-back, viewers may find this series a little dour. Even the smoothies have developed irony since the days of Kenneth Clark, who dressed in shades of tobacco and spoke in fluent don. In the 1980s, Jonathan Meades arrived with his suit-and-shades persona and some gently klutzy scripts, both of which were cultivated to show how strange this genre is – a genre in which the audience is sitting at home, watching people on a screen look at works of art and describe them aloud. And yet, until a flurry of gentle effects in the final episode, such as Fox appearing in a rear-view mirror or on a monitor inside the shot – in the twenty-first century (the idea goes), technology allows the powerful to lie the way they breathe – *Age of the Image* has too little of the self-scrutiny that Meades believed this genre lacked. He was right. Art documentaries should be suspicious of their supposedly neutral seriousness.

What underpins this nebulous story is Fox's command of pace. He is exceptionally good at what should be a prerequisite for the documentary form: he knows the right way to explain. Explaining requires a generous tempo, where 'too slow' is patronising and 'too quick' is out of reach. It should dissolve into a backdrop that makes a silent sense. And there is a decency to *Age of the Image*, to Fox's ability to be amicable without being chummy or dull. It is satisfying to be a student, we remember, as we learn how the photographer Frank Hurley made composite prints at the height of the First World War **FIG. 4**. This comes in episode 1, and when we get to episode 4, on 'deepfakes' and Photoshop, Hurley is mentioned again – slipped so neatly into the flow that a century, or three hours, might never have passed.



Fig. 4 Still from 'A New Reality', from the series *Age of the Image*, directed by Alexander Leith. 2020.

Fox's scripts are conventional, too: lectures posing as conversations. They are informative, which is part of the point; when Fox lingers on an artist or artwork, he is meticulous, at least as far as time allows. In the first episode, for example, he sweeps through Hannah Höch's *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* (1919) FIG. 5. Each element of this satirical photomontage of Weimar life – Einstein's head, wrestlers' legs – is laced together and wrapped up into an explication of who, what and why. As a lesson, it is bravura. But as analysis – 'there is method in this madness!' – it is pretty gawky stuff. Worse are the generalisations, always hard to give a casual ring. 'Images no longer depend on reality', Fox tells us, 'reality has become dependent on images'.



Fig. 5 Still from 'A New Reality', from the series *Age of the Image*, directed by Alexander Leith. 2020.

If each disappointment in *Age of the Image* lasted only as long as one of these phrases, you could overlook it – after all, the rest is slick. But as Fox goes wandering through history, contemporary political concerns clash with those of yesteryear. Sometimes this doesn't matter, because the show can be frictionless: Fox has nothing but praise for the first wave of feminists, and Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979), an artwork made with anger and pride, is met with reverence. But sometimes history will not conspire. For instance, if you decide to talk about Helmut Newton **FIG. 6**, you might as well face the facts: Newton's artful images depicting women on leads or saddled up, will not be excused on account of aesthetics by the moralists of today. Fox is gliding into a crossfire: on the one hand, he asks questions such as 'is this work misogynistic? Are we, as viewers, complicit?'; and on the other, he adopts stances like Newton's own, that the images are 'empowering'.



Fig. 6 Still from 'Seductive Dreams', from the series *Age of the Image*, directed by Alexander Leith. 2020.

To form a view is to stake a claim, and no-one gets out of those clashes unscathed. But abrasion is the only route to philosophical thinking with political weight. It is a shame, then, that Fox's verdict on Newton ('a bit of both') is woolly, his rhetorical questions (as above) are legion, and his clichés ('deeply problematic') are no better than cowardice. His elegance starts to pall, because there is little underneath. We long to have the sheen restored – if we cannot be challenged, it is lovely to be cosseted – but once we hear how hollow the structure is, we can never quite settle again. *Age of the Image* is a classy series, as classy as its leading man – and if it cannot be charming, it would rather say nothing at all.

Footnotes

- 1** The series was commissioned for the Open University and originally broadcast in the United Kingdom on BBC Channel Four in March 2020. It is available for streaming or download on the BBC's iPlayer service until the end of February 2021.

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