



Hope and Hokum

The political cult of personality didn't die with Stalin, as David Crowley discovers in a new book of campaign posters

When Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev revealed the extent of Stalin's crimes in his Secret Speech to a gathering of the Communist Party in Moscow in 1956, he announced the end of the 'cult of personality'. The religious fervour which had turned his predecessor into an infallible god with unlimited power

and miraculous charisma was to be shelved, never to be revived.

But, of course, Khrushchev could not envisage the battery of PR consultants, media-gurus, spin-doctors and stylists which would serve those who have sought high office ever since. Their collective task has been to turn bookish figures into forceful

personalities and charlatans into Honest Johns for mass media consumption. Famously, in the late 1970s Margaret Thatcher employed her own image consultant, Gordon Reese, who, in turn, lowered her voice and restyled her wardrobe. Her opponent in the 1979 election, Labour leader Jim Callaghan, was riled. "If you want to be photographed holding a cow the wrong way round she'll oblige," he complained. "But ask them [the Tories] to discuss the issues, and all you'll get is a deathly silence ... in this election the Tories are being sold as though they were Daz or Omo."

ABOVE: Barack Obama poster, anonymous designer (US, 2007); John F Kennedy poster, anonymous (US, 1960). above, right: Yulia Tymoshenko posters, both anonymous (Ukraine, 2007). above, top right: Margaret Thatcher poster, anonymous (UK, circa 1984)

Head to Head, a new book of posters and publicity photographs – drawn from the massive collections of the Museum für Gestaltung in Zurich – lays out a collective portrait of politicians from around the world since the early twentieth century. It charts both the ways in which they have been sold to us and, in satirical works, graphic attempts to puncture their policies and reputations.

Posters might seem to be dying stars in the post-Gutenberg galaxy.

But, as Head to Head emphasises, old media like the poster continue today, albeit folded into new relations with digital media. In fact, they are designed and published by political parties in considerable numbers, often to draw the attention of other media. Just think how many times you've seen Shepard Fairey's iconic image of Barack Obama reproduced on the internet and on television in the last year.

Given its ubiquity, it is perhaps a surprise that Fairey's pop aesthetic

РАЇНСЬКИЙ ПРОРИВ



has not forced its way on to the cover of Head to Head. In fact, a detail from another 2008 campaign image of the senator from Chicago features. As a double-page comparison makes clear later on, this poster is a lift of a Kennedy campaign poster from the 1960 presidential elections. Of course, the Obama campaign did much to emphasise this association. Kennedy's sexual peccadilloes long overlooked, JFK has now become a secular saint in the American consciousness. Obama's image has siphoned off a little of this faith.

The priests of image management are in constant battle with the dark

arts of caricature. President Nixon struggled against the persistent depiction of him as 'tricky Dick', a shape-shifting crook whose 'true character' was 'revealed' in his five o'clock shadow, sweaty brow and heavy eyebrows. His face was a gift to his enemies. After his election in 1969, it became a kind of combat zone for anti-Vietnam War cartoonists who filled his brain cavity with corpses and his eyes with blood. One cannot help but think that his image team conceded the battle – if not the war – in the 1972 election when they commissioned a poster of Nixon with his back to the

camera, reflecting thoughtfully out of the windows of the Oval Office.

Irony has been the tool of choice for those who set out to puncture the puffed-up egos of politicians and to challenge the effects of their actions. Exaggeration and parody can reveal suppressed truths. Hitler's claims to represent Germany were brilliantly dismantled by John Heartfield's photomontages and in France in 1968, President de Gaulle was made into an enemy of popular democracy in the posters of the Atelier Populaire.

But what are the effects of irony today? Last year Francesco Vezzoli

produced a series of portraits of aspirant presidents for a virtual American election entitled Democracy-crazy. Images of actress Sharon Stone and French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, styled in suitably bland suits and adopting the 'resolute' poses of office, were captioned with the kind of hollow slogan which now substitutes for policies (such as 'Make America Strong'). Lévy and Stone – despite their differences – embody the same person, Patricia/Patrick Hill. Vezzoli's aim is to expose what we take for granted every time a politician steps onto the hustings.



But the truth of our political culture today is not only stranger but also more interesting than this fiction. After all, 'Conan the Republican' Arnold Schwarzenegger retired his loin-cloth to become the Governor of California in 2003.

Yulia Tymoshenko would surely win more plaudits as a conceptual artist than Vezzoli were she to give up her career as Prime Minister of the Ukraine. With her trademark braided golden hair, she has the appearance of a Slavic goddess at meetings around world. And in the considerable self-publicity which issues from her ➤



< office, she is sometimes styled as a medieval queen of the nation and, at others, as a space cadet. What is remarkable is that such outlandish imagery can be published without any hint of irony. Politicians in Britain and western Europe seem unprepared to do little more than smile for the camera in a well-tailored suit for fear of appearing ridiculous. By contrast, Tymoshenko seems to enhance her popular appeal with her spectacular images. One way of viewing such images is to see the Ukrainians as unduly naïve, new to democracy: but perhaps the fact is that we are overly

cynical, jaded by our political culture. During the recent US elections, it seemed that irony had been banished from political life. When Barack Obama was portrayed as Osama Bin Laden and his wife, Michelle, as a gun-totin' Black Panther on the cover of *The New Yorker* in July, shrill protests were voiced by the Democratic Party. The explanation offered by the editor of the liberal, pro-Democrat weekly, that the cartoon was poking fun at Obama's enemies, was to no avail. After years of culture-jamming and sardonic anti-Bush protests, sincerity, it seems, is the order of the

day. In a spoof issue of *The New York Times* newspaper which appeared on its streets in November this year, the headline announced 'Iraq War Ends'. On its pages, corporations apologised for past misdemeanours and the roll out of universal health care was described. Dated July 4, 2009, it described America six months after Bush and the Neo-Cons have departed the stage. Capturing the tremendous optimism felt by many Americans today, the spoof paper was effectively a checklist of promises that the new president would have to keep. The paper's fake business section

included an article with the title 'Public Relations Industry Forecasts a Series of Massive Layoffs'. The cause of this reality check, according to the article's writer, was not the economic recession but new legislation requiring honesty in public life. But, as the record-breaking spend on publicity during the 2008 US presidential election (estimated at \$2.5 billion) makes clear, this might be the hardest promise of all to keep. ■

Head to Head, edited by the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, includes texts by Christian Brändle, Thomas Macho, Sabina Brändli, Bettina Richter, Nicolas Rigbetti, Ulrich Schmid, Francesco Vezzoli, and Klaus Waschik. Available now from Lars Müller Publishers, €29.90. See larsmueller-publishers.com

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