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Review of Daniel J. Boorstin. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*. (Published in the UK as *The Image: Or What Happened to the American Dream*). New York: Atheneum, 1962. ISBN: 978-0679741800 (1992 ed., paperback, \$17.00).

Reviewed by **Stephen J. Whitfield**, Brandeis University

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“*The Image* Revisited”¹

The impact of American culture abroad has become obvious to travelers, and not only a source of income for shrewd marketers of the nation’s consumer goods, but also, of course, a subject that has generated lively scholarly interest and a formidable bibliography. Whether in movies or in music, whether on television or on the internet, no nation in history has bestriden the planet as the United States has; and the political ideas emanating from the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights have enjoyed an even longer (and more salutary) influence. For close to a century, the appeal of such a culture has been a force to be reckoned with; in recent decades, in much of the world, American programs and American products—enhanced by American power—have been close to inescapable. By now they are so often entwined with local habits and values that the foreignness of the New World has become internalized. During a recent visit to France, I noticed a teenager wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the following slogan: Liberté, Egalité, Beyoncé. But how might the most striking qualities of American society be identified and understood? What are its laws of historical motion?

One book, published a little more than half a century ago, continues to merit attention as well as admiration for helping to answer such questions.² In *The Image* Daniel J. Boorstin tried to make contemporary life intelligible, by drawing upon not only the documents that could be found in the archives or the books that

¹ This essay is partly based upon “The Image: The Lost World of Daniel Boorstin,” published in *Reviews in American History* 19 (June 1991): 302-312.

² Though the date on the copyright page is 1962, the author’s copyright is recorded as 1961.

were accessible in the stacks but also upon his “personal experience: the billboards I have seen, the newspapers and magazines I have read, the radio programs I have heard, the television programs I have watched, the movies I have attended, the advertisements I receive daily through the mail, the commodities I have noticed in stores, the salesmen’s pitches which have been aimed at me, the conversation I hear, the desires I sense all around me. The tendencies and weaknesses I remark in twentieth-century America are my own.” Without abandoning his vocation as an historian, Boorstin became something of a phenomenologist, seeking to explore the meaning of “the trivia of our daily experience [which] are evidence of the most important question in our lives: namely, what we believe to be real” (264-265).

Such a methodology makes *The Image* rather anomalous. It is the work of an historian; but it can be verified or rejected not only according to the usual criteria, such as the salience of its documentation, or the internal consistency and plausibility of its argument, but also in the light of the quotidian phenomena that his readers encounter in their own lives. This particular reader doubts that the passage of over half a century has dimmed the luster of Boorstin’s observations. Indeed it is possible to claim that so savvy are the insights sprinkled through his book that the American landscape—perhaps even more so in our current century—can seem Boorstinian. The emerging and exasperating details that he described have continued to spread like an oil slick across the national scene, compelling foreigners like Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco to concoct terms like “hyper-reality” to try to do justice to what America has signified.³ Boorstin adopted a different stance. With an aw-shucks discomfort with theory that can come across as characteristically American, he conceded at the outset that he “cannot describe ‘reality,’” thus making himself “a sitting duck for my more profound philosopher-colleagues” at the University of Chicago and elsewhere (viii). Instead *The Image* claims only to know what “reality” is not.

Contemporary Americans, Boorstin argued, live in an “age of tautological experience,” in which the ersatz trumps the authentic, the artificial is preferred to the natural, the contrived looms larger than the spontaneous, and the remote triumphs over the direct (115). The shadows that this culture has cast so widely in the world are without substance. To Gottfried W. Leibniz’s famous question (later Heidegger’s) of why there is something rather than nothing, Boorstin suggested to these more sophisticated philosopher-colleagues that mass culture in the United States offers no guarantee that there is not nothing. His chapters on the news media, on icons, on tourism raised doubts about whether there is any “there” there. Because of the increasing facility with which experience can be reproduced and images disseminated, the Graphic Revolution has thinned out our capacity to face life directly and has left us vulnerable to the manipulation of those who create events (“pseudo-events”) designed to lock us within an enticing hall of mirrors. Thus “we are haunted, not by reality, but by those images we have put in place of reality” (6). No wonder then that, within a couple of decades of the publication of *The Image*, children aged four to six were asked whether they liked television or their fathers better—and 44% replied in favor of television.⁴

The first half of *The Image* is organized around the theme of declension. The chapters on journalism, on fame, and on travel establish an historical baseline, which the author locates a couple of centuries ago or more. Back then there were no press agents or interviewers, no publicists or travel agents, no ghost-writers for

³ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, tr. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1988); Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, tr. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

⁴ Lance Morrow, “The Politics of the Box Populi,” *Time* 113 (11 June 1979), 95.

starlets or speechwriters for politicians. The aura of greatness was founded in exemplary deeds and exceptional talent. The news tended to be the monopoly of the literate, and those without wealth did not travel abroad or visit museums. But the Graphic Revolution, inaugurated by the printing press and much later augmented by the wizardry of mass communication and the allure of mass culture, transformed experience into something synthetic and fabricated. Thus the epic of America therefore became a breach of promise, a downward trajectory that has confronted the populace with “the menace of unreality... We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so ‘realistic’ that they can live in them. We are the most illusioned people on earth,” Boorstin wrote. We “have fallen in love with our own image,” and therefore we are doomed to frustration. “Nearly everything we do to enlarge our world, to make life more interesting, more varied, more exciting, more vivid,” produces the opposite effect (241, 255, 257). Thomas Jefferson believed that the test of civilization is happiness. Sigmund Freud rebutted him by claiming that the price of civilization has been unhappiness—and *The Image* sides with Freud. What happened to the American dream is that our technological innovativeness and prowess, our very restlessness and dynamism, have produced an incapacity to secure our lives on stable foundations.

Who are the culprits? Boorstin puts much of the blame on ballyhoo, or on what H. L. Mencken mocked as buncombe. “The rise of advertising has brought a social redefinition of the very notion of truth,” Boorstin asserted. “What seems important is not truth but verisimilitude,” so that “it is more important that a statement be believable than that it be true” (212, 227, 289). Such a shift made hoaxes more likely to succeed. (He seems to have forgotten the Donation of Constantine and other forgeries that mar the annals of religion.) In 1983 the historical profession suffered a humiliating moment when the eminent author of *The Last Days of Hitler* fell for a fraudulent diary. The credulousness of H. R. Trevor-Roper (“I’m staking my reputation on it”) was bad enough, though at least a recognizable scholarly norm could be invoked. But worse was the reaction of a respectable magazine like *Newsweek*, which proclaimed in its cover story on the release of the “diary”: “Genuine or not, it almost doesn’t matter in the end . . .”⁵ That “almost” represents a rather modest barrier against buzz, against capitulation to an advertising definition of truth that caused Boorstin to fear for the reliability of “reality.”

One of the biggest best-sellers in the history of publishing posed a different sort of challenge to the ideal of authenticity. Alex Haley’s *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) created a sensation, quickly selling over six million copies in hardcover, winning a special National Book Award and a special Pulitzer Prize, as well as galvanizing the interest of translators who helped sell the book in thirty-seven foreign languages.⁶ Initially *Roots* was hailed for its painstaking historical research; the indefatigable Haley was photographed in the Library of Congress doing what the rest of us do all the time, surrounded by piles of documents and books. But then he was successfully sued for having plagiarized a novel (Harold Courlander’s *The African*), and soon the scrutiny of several historians and journalists demonstrated that the genealogy that so stirred readers of *Roots* did not hold up. (If Kunta Kinte ever existed, he could not have been Haley’s ancestor, having landed in Annapolis four years too late to “be” Toby Waller.) The fallback position that the author adopted exemplified what *The Image* called “the dissolution of forms.” Haley called his book “faction,” a blend of

⁵ “Hitler’s Secret Diaries,” *Newsweek* 101 (2 May 1983), 52, 60.

⁶ Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976).

research and the genre of fiction.⁷ *Roots*, he averred, conveyed “symbolic accuracy” and “spiritual truth.”⁸ In 1977, when ABC adapted this “saga” to television, the network decided to play it safe by announcing that its version was “based on the novel by Alex Haley.” That might have posed a dilemma for the Pulitzer Prize jury, which had not believed that it was honoring a work of fiction. Maybe, the jurors might have concluded, it almost doesn’t matter in the end.

The popular culture that has swept so much of the planet has continued to follow a Boorstinian script—jumbling the ordering and sequencing of genres, impugning the very notion of hierarchy and significance, trivializing so much of what it touches, and blurring the line between the original and the copy. To make the memoir *All the President’s Men* (1974) effective on the screen, for example, Robert Redford was early involved in helping Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein to conceive their book about uncovering the Watergate scandal—their own up-close-and-personal account of what they did—before they had begun writing it.⁹ The cover of the Warner paperback does not show a photo of the two reporters but rather the two movie stars who played them. Jonathan Boorstin, the associate producer of the 1976 film version, thus helped validate his father’s account of “the dissolution of forms.” Another son, Paul Boorstin, and his wife Sharon later secured the movie rights to a novel before they had signed a publisher’s contract to write a book that the couple had not yet written. “The new trend in Hollywood,” they explained, “is to finance the writing of the novel by buying the movie rights. It makes sense.”¹⁰ That wasn’t the way that Leo Tolstoy or James Joyce wrote fiction, but then they lived before the momentum of the Graphic Revolution had impugned the very notion of generic integrity. Nor are such ambiguities confined to the United States. In 1994, when *Der Spiegel* ran a cover story on the release of Steven Spielberg’s film about “Der gute Deutsche,” the weekly magazine opted not to depict the “Juden-Retter” Oskar Schindler but instead the Irish-born actor who played him, Liam Neeson.

But what does it even mean to be an author in America? In 2011 Glenn Beck appeared on the radio program *Imus in the Morning* to plug his best-selling biography of the first President, *Being George Washington*. Beck quickly realized that his host had not bothered to read (or perhaps even skim) the book, and as a result seemed to have a meltdown: “You’ve never, you’ve never . . . I mean, I don’t even know why I am here.” Don Imus picked up the book, turned to the title page and asked Beck: “Who is Kevin Balfé?” Beck responded: “He actually helps me because I obviously don’t sit at a typewriter, Don . . . I don’t sit at a typewriter and pound every letter out of the books.”¹¹ An “author interview” in which both author and interviewer admitted

⁷ Richard Nelson Current, *Arguing with Historians: Essays on the Historical and the Unhistorical* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 153-156; Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Inadvertent Epic: From Uncle Tom’s Cabin to Roots* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 71-85.

⁸ Quoted in James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 312.

⁹ Jack Hirschberg, *A Portrait of All the President’s Men* (New York: Warner Books, 1976), 28-31.

¹⁰ Quoted in “Running the Film Backward,” *Time* 115 (24 March 1980), 86.

¹¹ Gregory Cowles, “Reading and Writing,” *New York Times Book Review*, 11 December 2011, 42.

that they had neither written nor read the book to be discussed does deserve some sort of prize for candor. But it was also the *reductio ad absurdum* of what Boorstin called “the Age of Contrivance.”

The Image was published before the emergence of *People* Magazine and its imitators. But Boorstin had already foreseen the confusion of categories, such as between the hero and the celebrity. His definition of the latter (a “human pseudo-event”) as someone who “is known for his well-knownness,” could fit so many figures that there is little point in trying to tabulate them, though they are far more familiar than, say, the scientists who have conquered disease and made life more tolerable (57). Instead the Graphic Revolution has debased the designation of “hero.” General Douglas MacArthur once told the star of *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949): “You represent the American serviceman better than the American serviceman himself.”¹² Congress concurred in authorizing a John Wayne medal for having personified the nation’s martial virtues, even though the only time he ever slipped into a uniform was when Warner Bros. provided it. Biographies of other actors, such as Gary Cooper and Sylvester Stallone, are brandished with “hero” in the title or subtitle, though these particular lifetime civilians never displayed courage under fire or elsewhere. In the year that *The Image* appeared, *Life* Magazine pushed the envelope past our own species by extolling “Ham”—the nation’s first “astrochimp”—as a “real hero,”¹³ as though the creature had any choice in the matter of space exploration. Boorstin did not consider a third category: villain. When *People* portrayed its “hundred most fascinating people” of 1996, the stars of movies and television were joined by “the Unabomber,” Theodore Kaczynski.

Could there be a remedy for the synthetic, the illusory, and the meretricious features of this culture? Boorstin could supply no solution except vigilance. No legislation, no policy, no new agency could be envisioned in building dikes against the flood of pseudo-events. He asked his readers only for a deep awareness of our predicament, beginning with the realization that it *is* a predicament. “The task of disenchantment is finally” the task of the reader’s, he opined. “Each of us must disenchant himself” (vii, 260). Each reader can also decide whether the subsequent decades have provided a basis for optimism.

But *The Image* did anticipate the pursuit of a scholarly agenda surprisingly recommended by an historian whose first books examined the legal legacy of Blackstone and the circle of thinkers and scientists around Jefferson. In “Suggestions for Further Reading (and Writing),” Boorstin proposed fresh topics for exploration—such as histories of news and communications, American photography, histories of the book and of printing, and histories of television. Biographies of figures like Rudolph Valentino, Charlie Chaplin, Frank Sinatra, Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley, the author predicted, might “teach us more about ourselves than many of the more lengthy studies of less significant but more conventionally ‘important’ minor figures in our political, literary and academic life” (274, 282-283). In seeking to carve out some academic space for the cultural reverberations that help determine the texture of ordinary life, Boorstin helped enlarge the contours of American Studies. And in noting how fully “pseudo-events” lend a dramaturgic and symbolic import to public life, injecting elements of “soft power” into American statecraft, he also foresaw their pertinence to the understanding of political history and diplomatic history.

¹² Quoted in Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 514-415.

¹³ Emanuel Levy, *John Wayne: Prophet of the American Way of Life* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1988), 39-40; “Great Triple Play in U. S. Space Race” and “A Happy End for Ham’s First Flight,” *Life* 50 (10 February 1961), 17, 21.

If *The Image* remains perhaps the most imaginative and most melancholy work of any American historian to tackle the elusiveness of “reality,” the author can hardly be faulted for failing to foresee how quaint his diagnosis appears from the perspective of politics in the twenty-first century. What seemed in the early 1960s to be an epistemological problem, with Boorstin dodging its full metaphysical adumbrations, has become a civic problem that threatens the very idea of democracy. The technological transformation that the Graphic Revolution unleashed—mostly in the service of marketing—has now assumed a more sinister cast. On the Web the concentration of economic power that three companies have achieved (Google, Facebook and Amazon) does not augur well for a robust clash of ideas upon which popular sovereignty depends. No voters were given the opportunity to grant such power over information to so few corporations; the consequences for a system of self-government remain to be grasped.

Although *The Image* can be read as a book of lamentations, not even Boorstin anticipated the scale of the challenge to the norm of truthfulness in our time. Let two news items, from the summer of 2017, serve as melancholy conclusions to this account of the precariousness of “reality” in American culture. The collapse of truth into verisimilitude, against which he warned, now imperils the polity that has so often been upheld as a model for other peoples. In July researchers at the University of Washington claimed a capacity to “synthesize” a speech of Barack Obama, delivering lines on video that he had never actually spoken. To demonstrate that such a video is fabricated might take days of forensic analysis, the researchers warned, and by then—in an electoral campaign—the damage might well be incalculable and irrevocable.¹⁴ In August YouGov, the polling organization for the *Economist*, decided to ascertain how fully Republicans agreed with the advice that Congressman Lamar Smith (R-Texas) had given on the floor of the House of Representatives, four days after the most egregious serial liar—with no predecessor even coming close—ever to occupy the White House was inaugurated. “Better to get your news from the President,” Smith counseled his Congressional colleagues. “It might be the only way to get the unvarnished truth.” This summer seven out of ten Republican voters told YouGov that they trusted President Trump rather than the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, or CNN. Republicans trusted Trump to tell them the truth even more than they accepted the credibility of the *National Review* and the *Weekly Standard*. So authoritative did the President appear that 45% of the Republicans polled also favored “shut[ting] down news media outlets for publishing or broadcasting stories that are biased and inaccurate.”¹⁵ Whether the baseline is the eighteenth century of the Framers, or later, the implications need not be belabored.

Stephen J. Whitfield holds the Max Richter Chair in American Civilization at Brandeis University, where he has specialized in the politics and culture of the twentieth century. Among his books is *The Culture of the Cold War* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, rev. ed. 1996).

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¹⁴ Simon Shuster, “The Next Fake-News War,” *Time* 190 (18 September 2017), 53.

¹⁵ “Fox Populi,” *Economist* 424, no. 9052 (5-12 August 2017), 22.