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Yesterday and Today: Milton and the Tyrant's Image

The bell rings, and the dog is given a treat. The bell rings again, and the dog receives another treat. The cycle continues; the bell rings, and the dog eats his treat. But soon Pavlov's dog has become so accustomed to the cycle that the bell rings and the dog is already salivating, awaiting the treat that always comes next. While a seemingly harmless experiment on a dog, Pavlov's observation reveals an often-overlooked aspect of the human state – one's susceptibility to conditioning. Whether a sound, a color, an action, or merely a word – an image is projected that suggests how one should live and interact. While the all-pervasive influence of images dictating reality seems to be a modern phenomenon, it traces its roots to the imposing pyramids of the Egyptian pharaohs or the expressive statues of the ancient Greeks. In the seventeenth century, Milton exposes the tyrant's ability to manipulate the masses through imagery, whether the pompous ceremony of the Renaissance king or the glamorous advertisements of the postmodern corporation, but he also offers hope for the individual to pursue truth despite society's enslavement.

Recent cultural studies have emphasized a correlation between cultural norms and the images that saturate society. Images such as a rebellious teen, studious student, beautiful model, successful entrepreneur, amongst many others form what the French critic Guy Debord calls the spectacle. According to Debord, "[t]he spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord 12). These images define one's expected role within society and, in a sense, construct society to be "an immense accumulation of *spectacles*" so that "[a]ll that once was directly lived [has] become mere representations," dictating not only the individual's behavior but also one's inner desires (Debord 12). Because the image represents society's perception rather than an actual reality, images have become a tool in

the hands of those in authority to help maintain their power. For Debord, the image plays a “specialized role” as the “spokesman for all other activities” of society (18-9). Just as Pavlov’s dog became conditioned to react a certain way, through creating needs and meeting them in a specific manner, society’s images train its individual’s “craving” and desires (Krugman 68).

Like modern theorists, Milton recognized in the seventeenth century the potential for those in power to use images in order to tyrannically construct society to support their version of reality. Milton uses a teleological means to define a tyrant as an authoritative figure whose actions supersede the role they were intended to fulfill, attaining more power for the figure to exert his will upon the masses (Hawkes 213-4). Milton notes two forms of a tyrant. The first is external tyranny, in which the tyrant outwardly imposes his will upon the people. The second is internal tyranny, in which the tyrant shapes the people’s perception of reality so that they think according to his will.

In his later prose writings, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* and *Eikonoklastes*, Milton exposes Charles I as an external tyrant who imposes his will upon the English people. For Milton, the king receives political power from the people “only to be employed to the common peace and benefit,” and the tyrant “is he who, regarding neither law nor the common good reigns only for himself and his faction” (Milton, *Tenure* 759-60). Milton denounces Charles I as a tyrant because, rather than fulfilling the will of the people, he acted “as the transcendent and ultimate law above all [their] laws, and to rule [the people] forcibly by laws to which [they themselves] did not consent, but complained of” (802; Ch. 27).

In addition to identifying his external tyranny, Milton exposes Charles I’s use of images, in which he sought to tyrannically manipulate the English people internally to perceive reality in a manner suitable to maintain his control. Through his text *Eikonoklastes*, Milton reveals the

façade behind Charles I's propagandist pamphlet *Eikon Basilike*. Milton attacks Charles I's projection of himself as a Christian martyr – exposing Charles I's prayer to be plagiarized from Sir Philip's romance *Arcadia* (Milton, *Eikonoklastes* 793-4; Ch. 1), questioning the ability of Royal Court life to produce virtue (Milton, *Eikonoklastes* 800; Ch. 27), attacking Charles I's faulty scriptural support to maintain a strong church government (Milton, *Eikonoklastes* 801; Ch. 27), amongst many other challenges. Cumulating his attacks, Milton defines Charles I's pamphlet as having formed a “cup of deception, spiced and tempered to [the populace's] bane, they should deliver up themselves to these glozing words and illusions of” himself that do not match the harsh reality that the English people live within (Milton, *Eikonoklastes* 806; Ch. 27).

Using Milton's teleological approach to tyranny, Milton would interpret the modern corporation as being a tyrant, if it overstepped its bounds of providing the consumers' needs. The tyrant corporation manipulates the masses through images to construct the consumers' very desires. According to theorist Jonathan Beller, “[a]dvertising powerhouses use psychoanalytic techniques under the rubric of ‘theatre of the mind,’” as they fashion desirable identities correlating to their products. Through these different identities, corporations' advertisements cater individualistically to the masses, as they build upon one's fears and desires to suggest their product's identity as the ideal solution. According to one successful advertiser, “[m]arketing is building a brand in the mind of a prospect,” which “like a bell, should motivate people to take action with the expectation of a great result” (Hayden 38). While there are a variety of case studies to evaluate through Milton's two-fold definition of tyranny, the international bottled water organization FIJI exemplifies the corporation's ability to tyrannically exert its will and manipulate the American consumer through its image of false realities.

Though humbly beginning in 1995 in the unknown collection of islands in the southern Pacific Ocean, the bottled water company FIJI, named after the nation whose northern aquifer supplies all-natural water for its factory, rapidly grew to become a key corporation in the bottled water industry. Initially at its creation, FIJI was granted a temporary tax-exemption that would expire in 2008, which would give the company time to get started and produce enough funds “to become the biggest taxpayer in the” impoverished country, as suggested by FIJI’s founder David Gilmour in 2003 (qtd in Lenzer). Yet, while FIJI has become an internationally renowned, multimillion corporation, it has surpassed the power granted it; as FIJI continues to maintain its tax-exemption and effortlessly suppressed Fijian governmental attempts to implement various taxes on its production (Lenzer). Although the native Fijian population suffers from typhoid because of water impurities due to their impoverished water system, FIJI protects its “nearly exclusive” rights to the island’s pure water source (Lenzer). Although it was originally intended to create economic stability and infrastructure for the struggling nation, FIJI company tyrannically abuses the power the people had entrusted it in order to further the corporation’s best interests.

Simultaneous to fulfilling the external tyrant’s role, FIJI mirrors Charles I’s use of images to manipulate the masses, as it projects itself as a relevant and environmentally concerned product. In 2000, one of FIJI’s top officials verbally recognized FIJI’s emphasis on its image as he asserted that “[w]hat FIJI Water's done is go out there with a package that clearly looks like it's worth more money, and we've gotten people to pay more for us” (qtd. in Lenzer). Over the past decade, FIJI has donated over \$300,000 to support influential political leaders, such as President Obama, John Edwards, Hillary Clinton, and John McCain, in addition to a variety of charitable organizations and ecology-friendly societies (Lenzer). In fact, FIJI proudly advertises

its environmental involvement in the Fiji nation, as the current owner Resnick asserts that they “only use biofuels” (qtd in Lenzer), and the bottles’ label describes the company’s recent “project to protect 50,000 acres of rainforest” (Lenzer). Yet the image FIJI projects falls short of reality, as its factory “runs on diesel generators” and the recent project “has yet to obtain a lease” to even begin (Lenzer). While the FIJI advertisements declare “We are Fiji” (qtd in Lenzer), “[t]he reality of Fiji, the country, has been eclipsed by the glistening brand of [FIJI], the water” (Lenzer); the tyrant’s image of reality has become so pervasive that it seems to have shaped reality itself.

While tyranny exists, Milton condemns the masses’ susceptibility to a tyrant’s imagery, and instead he encourages the individual to personally resist. Milton denounces the individual who merely settles for the image of provided truth to “be a heretic in the truth” because the individual does not know the reason behind what he believes and thus falls prey to the tyrant’s images (Milton, *Aeropagetica* 739). Rather than merely settling for what one is told, Milton argues that one should constantly pursue truth using reason and submitting to the Holy Spirit’s guidance. In his text *Reason for Church Government*, Milton argues that the individual should share and discuss one’s God-given knowledge with others in order to gain further knowledge of God’s truth (665; bk. 2). Likewise in *Aeropagetica*, Milton asserts that as one searches for truth, rather than settling for the images the tyrant projects, “there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions,” but that this is all good because “opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making” (Milton, *Aeropagetica* 743).

Through his last three works, Milton poetically demonstrates the individual’s pursuit of truth through Divine guidance and reason. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton recounts the failure of individuals as they fall prey to the attractiveness of Satan’s image and disobey God. In *Paradise*

Regained, Milton recounts Jesus's perfect obedience to the Spirit's guidance and resistance to Satan's temptations as he recognizes that Satan's images of reality are "little else but dreams" (Milton, *Paradise Regained* 522; Bk. 4, lines 291-2). Building upon Jesus's model that one can resist, in Milton's third text *Samson Agonistes*, Milton follows the story of Samson after having already fallen prey to Dalila's deception. Though Samson initially had succumbed to the image his Philistine jailers had formed for him, his submission to the Holy Spirit strengthens him to ultimately defeat the Philistines and bring glory back to God. Through these three epic poems, Milton provides hope for the individual to reject the false image he had allowed to confine him in favor of the truth that God reveals.

Along with the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the individual's use of reason to pursue truth, Milton introduces the role of the prophet and poet as a fellow promoter of the truth in contrast to the tyrant's images. Throughout his writings, Milton constructs the identity of a prophet as one who speaks and exposes truth regardless of who is listening, such as Milton's own attacks on Charles I or the modern New York journalist Anna Lenzer's detailed research behind FIJI's bottle water advertising. In addition to the prose-like prophetic exposure, Milton asserts that the poet's and artist's "abilities, wheresoever they be found, are the inspired gift of God rarely bestowed," which should be used to help promote the pursuit of truth (*Reason* 669; bk. 2). Milton would be supportive of an action like the Dove Soap's campaign in 2006. Through a rapid time-elapse film depicting a photo shoot for an advertisement, they expose the manipulation of the advertised image through make up, artificial lighting, and major Photoshop adjustments to the original image of the model, thus revealing the difference between the image's advertisement of beauty for the consumer to attempt to buy into in contrast to actual reality.

Though the tyrant Charles I, who Milton opposed, died over three hundred fifty years ago, Milton's understanding of the threat of tyranny and the tyrant's use of images continues today in the postmodern corporation. Unlike Pavlov's dog, who continues to desire the treat he was conditioned to receive, perhaps the postmodern American consumer can individually follow Milton's example and be internally free from the tyrant's manipulation. Or perhaps American society will fulfill Philip Dick's prophesy in his final novel *VALIS*: "We did not fall because of moral error; we fell because of an intellectual error: that of taking the phenomenal world as real" (qtd. in Hawkes 1).

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