

Book review

Cheles, L., and Giacone, A. (Eds). *The Political Portrait. Leadership, Image and Power*, UK: Routledge, 2020, 348p. ISBN 9781138054233

This rich edited collection by Cheles and Giacone is a broad survey of theoretical approaches to the study of political portraiture. In putting together this volume, the editors have clearly aimed for variety; in terms of the visual genres they cover (artistic portraits, posters, photography, film, cartoons) but also in the types of research questions examined. Political portraiture is an important and topical area of investigation, and this volume will be of most use to readers looking for inspiration and guidance in understanding the ways in which a political portrait is constructed, functions as a system of codes, and affects public opinion in various social and political contexts. Each chapter constitutes a case study, and as such the book covers an extended period of time and a wide range of political regimes. The structure of the book allows for an independent reading of each chapter but, read as a whole, also offers a far-reaching overview of the developments of political portraiture throughout history, the adaptation to modern technologies, as well as the examination of similarities and differences across different countries and political regimes. The broad conceptual and methodological spectrum covered in this edited collection allows scholars to develop a sharper understanding of political portraits' creation, circulation, and consumption and acquire a clearer appreciation of the role that each plays in social and political processes. In an exceptionally wide spectrum of visual politics, this careful interrogation of political portraiture builds upon the visual scholarship and makes productive contributions with respect to a niche but important area in visual studies.

The book is expansive and ambitious, with Cheles and Giacone bringing together valuable contributions from 16 authors. The collection consists of 17 chapters, implicitly organised into five sections. The opening chapter by Cheles and Sorlin sets out the significance of understanding and examining political portraiture across space and time. At the present moment, and right back through antiquity, the editors argue, "pictures do not play an ancillary function, but are thoughtfully designed and used for strategic ends" (p. xviii). The first section examines the English-speaking world by focusing on the United States and Great Britain. Seidman offers a rich account of US visual politics by drawing on a wide range of genres, from painted portraits and campaign posters to sculptures, cartoons, and audiovisual material. In Downs' chapter the focus is on British political leaders (Churchill, Wilson, Thatcher, and Blair) and their attempts to construct a public persona that would make them acceptable to voters.

In the second section, the focus shifts to the rise of fascism and the role that political portraiture played in fascist regimes. Ridolfi provides a review of the visual propaganda that was employed in Italy in the years before the First World War. The following chapters in this area constitute country-specific case studies of fascist political leaders. With reference to Il Duce's photographic portraits and the role of the media of the time, Antola Swan argues that "the propaganda of fascism relied heavily on the portraits of Mussolini to mythologize his public persona" (p. 89). In the subsequent chapter, Dreidemy reflects on the controversial use of portraiture regarding the Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss. As the author suggests, contrary to the traditional

iconography of macho depictions of right-wing dictators, satirical images of Dollfuss by his political opponents “helped reinforce the image of a regime of ‘lesser evil’” (p. 108). The final chapter in this section explores the Spanish dictator, Francisco Franco. Sorlin interrogates the various personas that the dictator sought to construct, and concludes by raising interesting questions around the potentiality of such a leader to survive the television or digital media era.

The third section is devoted to the Communist and former-Communist countries. In the first chapter in this section, Gill focuses on the Soviet Union and latterly Russia. The author explores the use of visuals by various political leaders, from Lenin to Putin, to generate symbols that would validate their power. In doing so, he ponders over the differences in the rationale behind the construction of the leaders’ political images following the transition from the USSR to contemporary Russia. Landsberger’s chapter focuses on the many ‘faces’ of the founder of the People’s Republic of China, Mao Zedong. The author discerns between the various facets of the constructed image – namely, the Tiananmen Mao, the Revolutionary Mao, the Domesticated Mao, the Divine Mao, the Artsy Mao, and the Consuming Mao – in order to discuss and explain how “Mao’s many personae serve as embodiment of the modernised nation”, and of Chinese identity. In the next chapter, Ginsberg offers an illuminating study of political portraiture in North Korea, finding that this has been overwhelmingly dominated by Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. Marin’s chapter examines how portraits of the Romanian communist leader Nicolae Ceaușescu, made during his rule and following the fall of his regime were used to fabricate his public image.

The fourth section covers European countries in the post-war period that Cheles and Giacone earlier situate as considering “the extent to which the personality cults of Mussolini, Marshal Pétain and Hitler have affected the representation of (post-war) democratically elected leaders” (p. xviii). Wilken’s chapter highlights similarities and differences in the visual strategies of German Chancellors, covering various political leaders such as Konrad Adenauer, Helmut Schmidt, and Angela Merkel, among others. Drawing on the imagery of post-war Italian political leaders, Cheles explores the developments that took place in the construction of political portraits, finding a strong reliance on personalisation and spectacularisation, as well as a robust attempt to avoid depictions that could evoke earlier fascist propaganda. In the chapter that follows, Giacone provides further insights into Italian political portraiture by addressing the crucial role of satire in the use of cartoons and caricatures. The last chapter in this section focuses on the use of political portraits in France. Cheles thoroughly examines various political leaders, from Mitterrand to Macron and Le Pen, and discusses the importance of effigies in election campaigns in France.

The fifth section consists of two chapters that focus on the Greater Middle-East region. In the first of these, Wilson and Niyazioğlu discuss the promotional use of political portraiture by the Turkish political leaders Kemal Atatürk and İsmet İnönü. The endmost chapter by Göttke the editors advance as exploring “the ways in which the effigies of United States presidents have been employed in Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan as forms of protest” (p. xviii).

Overall, the volume is carefully curated and includes a rich collection of close to 200 illustrations. Cheles and Giacone encourage the readers to consider the multiple functions of political portraiture and reflect on how political leaders’ public personae have been constructed. As such, this is a

valuable contribution to the field of visual communication (Aiello and Parry, 2019) and the growing field of visual politics (Veneti, Jackson and Lilleker, 2019; Holtz-Bacha & Johansson, 2017; Archetti, 2014), and essential reading for scholars and students interested in the iconography of political leadership.

References

Aiello, G. and Parry, K. (2019). *Visual Communication: Understanding Images in Media Culture*. London: Sage.

Archetti, C. (2014). *Politicians, Personal Image and the Construction of Political Identity. A Comparative Study of the UK and Italy*. London: Palgrave.

Holtz-Bacha C, Johansson B (2017) *Election Posters Around the Globe. Political Campaigning in the Public Space*. Springer.

Veneti, A., Jackson, D., Lilleker, D. (2019). *Visual Political Communication*. London: Palgrave.