

LAW 37

CREATE COMPELLING SPECTACLES

JUDGMENT

Striking imagery and grand symbolic gestures create the aura of power—everyone responds to them. Stage spectacles for those around you, then, full of arresting visuals and radiant symbols that heighten your presence. Dazzled by appearances, no one will notice what you are really doing.

ANTONY AND CLEOPATHA

She relied above all upon her physical presence and the spell and enchantment which it could create.... She came sailing up the river Cydnus in a barge with a poop of gold, its purple sails billowing in the wind, while her rowers caressed the water with oars of silver which dipped in time to the music of the flute, accompanied by pipes and lutes. Cleopatra herself reclined beneath a canopy of cloth of gold, dressed in the character of Aphrodite, as we see her in paintings, while on either side to complete the picture stood boys costumed as Cupids who cooled her with their fans. Instead of a crew the barge was lined with the most beautiful of her waiting-women attired as Nereids and Graces, some at the rudders, others at the tackle of the sails, and all the while an indescribably rich perfume, exhaled from innumerable censers, was wafted from the vessel to the riverbanks. Great multitudes accompanied this royal progress, some of them following the queen on both sides of the river from its very mouth, while others hurried down from the city of Tarsus to gaze at the sight. Gradually the crowds drifted away from the marketplace, where Antony awaited the queen enthroned on his tribunal, until at last he was left sitting quite alone. And the word spread on every side that Aphrodite had come to revel with Dionysus for the happiness of Asia. Antony then sent a message inviting Cleopatra to dine with him. But she thought it more appropriate that he

should come to her, and so, as he wished to show his courtesy and goodwill, he accepted and went. He found the preparations made to receive him magnificent beyond words, but what astonished him most of all was the extraordinary number of lights. So many of these, it is said, were let down from the roof and displayed on all sides at once, and they were arranged and grouped in such ingenious patterns in relation to each other, some in squares and some in circles, that they created as brilliant a spectacle as can ever have been devised to delight the eye.

LIFE OF ANTONY, PLUTARCH, c. A.D. 46-120

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW I

In the early 1780s, word spread through Berlin of the strange and spectacular medical practice of a Dr. Weisleder. He performed his miracles in an enormous converted beer hall, outside which Berliners began to notice ever longer lines of people—the blind, the lame, anyone with an illness incurable by normal medicine. When it leaked out that the doctor worked by exposing the patient to the rays of the moon, he soon became dubbed The Moon Doctor of Berlin.

Sometime in 1783, it was reported that Dr. Weisleder had cured a well-to-do woman of a terrible ailment. He suddenly became a celebrity. Previously only the poorest Berliners had been seen waiting outside the beer hall in their rags; now magnificent carriages were parked outside, and gentlemen in frock coats, and ladies with enormous coiffures, lined the street as sunset drew near. Even folk with the mildest of ailments came, out of sheer curiosity. As they waited in line, the poorer clients would explain to the gentlemen and ladies that the doctor only practiced when the moon was in its increscent phase. Many would add that they themselves had already been exposed to the healing powers he called forth from the rays of the moon. Even those who felt cured kept coming back, drawn by this powerful experience.

Inside the beer hall, a strange and stirring spectacle greeted the visitor: Packed into the entrance hall was a crowd of all classes and ethnic backgrounds, a veritable Tower of Babel. Through tall windows on the northern side of the hall, silvery moonlight poured in at odd angles. The doctor and his wife, who, it seemed, was also able to effect the cure, practiced on the second floor, which was reached by a stairway, at the end of the hall. As the line edged closer to the stairs, the sick would hear shouts and cries from above, and word would spread of, perhaps, a blind gentleman suddenly able to see.

Once upstairs, the line would fork in two directions, toward a northern room for the doctor, a southern one for his wife, who worked only on the ladies. Finally, after hours of anticipation and waiting in line, the gentlemen patients would be led before the amazing doctor himself, an elderly man

with a few stalks of wild gray hair and an air of nervous energy. He would take the patient (let us say a young boy, brought in by his father), uncover the afflicted body part, and lift the boy up to the window, which faced the light of the moon. He would rub the site of the injury or illness, mumble something unintelligible, look knowingly at the moon, and then, after collecting his fee, send the boy and his father on their way. Meanwhile, in the south-facing room, his wife would be doing the same with the ladies—which was odd, really, since the moon cannot appear in two places at once; it cannot have been visible, in other words, from both windows. Apparently the mere thought, idea, and symbol of the moon were enough, for the ladies did not complain, and would later remark confidently that the wife of the Moon Doctor had the same healing powers as he.

Interpretation

Dr. Weisleder may have known nothing about medicine, but he understood human nature. He recognized that people do not always want words, or rational explanations, or demonstrations of the powers of science; they want an immediate appeal to their emotions. Give them that and they will do the rest—such as imagine they can be healed by the light reflected from a rock a quarter million miles away. Dr. Weisleder had no need of pills, or of lengthy lectures on the moon's power, or of any silly gadgetry to amplify its rays. He understood that the simpler the spectacle the better—just the moonlight pouring in from the side, the stairway leading to the heavens, and the rays of the moon, whether directly visible or not. Any added effects might have made it seem that the moon was not strong enough on its own. And the moon was strong enough—it was a magnet for fantasies, as it has been throughout history. Simply by associating himself with the image of the moon, the doctor gained power.

Remember: Your search for power depends on shortcuts. You must always circumvent people's suspicions, their perverse desire to resist your will. Images are an extremely effective shortcut: Bypassing the head, the seat of doubt and resistance, they aim straight for the heart. Overwhelming the eyes, they create powerful associations, bringing people together and stirring their emotions. With the white light of the moon in their eyes, your targets are blinded to the deceptions you practice.

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW II

In 1536 the future king Henri II of France took his first mistress, Diane de Poitiers. Diane was thirty-seven at the time, and was the widow of the grand seneschal of Normandy. Henri, meanwhile, was a sprightly lad of seventeen, who was just beginning to sow his wild oats. At first their union seemed merely platonic, with Henri showing an intensely spiritual devotion to Diane. But it soon became clear that he loved her in every way, preferring her bed to that of his young wife, Catherine de' Médicis.

In 1547 King Francis died and Henri ascended to the throne. This new situation posed perils for Diane de Poitiers. She had just turned forty-eight, and despite her notorious cold baths and rumored youth potions, she was beginning to show her age; now that Henri was king, perhaps he would return to the queen's bed, and do as other kings had done—choose mistresses from the bevy of beauties who made the French court the envy of Europe. He was, after all, only twenty-eight, and cut a dashing figure. But Diane did not give up so easily. She would continue to enthrall her lover, as she had enthralled him for the past eleven years.

In the Middle Ages the symbolist attitude was much more in evidence. ... Symbolism appears as a sort of short cut of thought. Instead of looking for the relation between two things by following the hidden detours of their causal connexions, thought makes a leap and discovers their relation not in the connexion of cause and effects, but in a connexion of signification.... Symbolist thought permits an infinity of relations between things. Each thing may denote a number of distinct ideas by its different special qualities, and a quality may have several symbolic meanings. The highest conceptions have symbols by the thousand. Nothing is too humble to represent and glory the sublime. The walnut signifies Christ: the sweet kernel is His divine nature, the green and pulpy outer peel is His humanity, the wooden shell between is the cross. Thus all things raise his thoughts to the eternal.... Every precious stone, besides its natural splendour sparkles with the brilliance of its symbolic values. The assimilation of roses and virginity is much more than a poetic comparison, for it reveals their common essence.

As each notion arises in the mind the logic of symbolism creates an harmony of ideas.

THE WANING OF THE MIDDLE AGES, JOHAN HUIZINGA, 1928

Diane's secret weapons were symbols and images, to which she had always paid great attention. Early on in her relationship with Henri, she had created a motif by intertwining her initials with his, to symbolize their union. The idea worked like a charm: Henri put this insignia everywhere—on his royal robes, on monuments, on churches, on the facade of the Louvre, then the royal palace in Paris. Diane's favorite colors were black and white, which she wore exclusively, and wherever it was possible the insignia appeared in these colors. Everyone recognized the symbol and its meaning. Soon after Henri took the throne, however, Diane went still further: She decided to identify herself with the Roman goddess Diana, her namesake. Diana was the goddess of the hunt, the traditional royal pastime and the particular passion of Henri. Equally important, in Renaissance art she symbolized chastity and purity. For a woman like Diane to identify herself with this goddess would instantly call up those images in the court, giving her an air of respectability. Symbolizing her "chaste" relationship with Henri, it would also set her apart from the adulterous liaisons of royal mistresses past.

To effect this association, Diane began by completely transforming her castle at Anet. She razed the building's structure and in its place erected a magnificent Doric-columned edifice modeled after a Roman temple. It was made in white Normandy stone flecked with black silex, reproducing Diane's trademark colors of black and white. The insignia of her and Henri's initials appeared on the columns, the doors, the windows, the carpet. Meanwhile, symbols of Diana—crescent moons, stags, and hounds—adorned the gates and facade. Inside, enormous tapestries depicting episodes in the life of the goddess lay on the floors and hung on the walls. In the garden stood the famous Goujon sculpture *Diane Chasseresse*, which is now in the Louvre, and which had an uncanny resemblance to Diane de Poitiers. Paintings and other depictions of Diana appeared in every corner of the castle.

Anet overwhelmed Henri, who soon was trumpeting the image of Diane de Poitiers as a Roman goddess. In 1548, when the couple appeared together in Lyons for a royal celebration, the townspeople welcomed them with a *tableau vivant* depicting a scene with Diana the huntress. France's

greatest poet of the period, Pierre de Ronsard, began to write verses in honor of Diana—indeed a kind of cult of Diana sprang up, all inspired by the king’s mistress. It seemed to Henri that Diane had given herself a kind of divine aura, and as if he were destined to worship her for the rest of his life. And until his death, in 1559, he did remain faithful to her—making her a duchess, giving her untold wealth, and displaying an almost religious devotion to his first and only mistress.

Interpretation

Diane de Poitiers, a woman from a modest bourgeois background, managed to captivate Henri for over twenty years. By the time he died she was well into her sixties, yet his passion for her only increased with the years. She knew the king well. He was not an intellectual but a lover of the outdoors—he particularly loved jousting tournaments, with their bright pennants, brilliantly caparisoned horses, and beautifully dressed women. Henri's love of visual splendor seemed childlike to Diane, and she played on this weakness of his at every opportunity.

Most astute of all was Diane's appropriation of the goddess Diana. Here she took the game beyond physical imagery into the realm of the psychic symbol. It was quite a feat to transform a king's mistress into an emblem of power and purity, but she managed it. Without the resonance of the goddess, Diane was merely an aging courtesan. With the imagery and symbolism of Diana on her shoulders, she seemed a mythic force, destined for greatness.

You too can play with images like these, weaving visual clues into an encompassing gestalt, as Diane did with her colors and her insignia. Establish a trademark like these to set yourself apart. Then take the game further: Find an image or symbol from the past that will neatly fit your situation, and put it on your shoulders like a cape. It will make you seem larger than life.

There was a man named Sakamotoya Hechigwan who lived in upper Kyoto.... When [Emperor] Hideyoshi gave his great Cha-no-yu [tea ceremony] meeting at Kitano in the tenth month of 1588, Hechigwan set up a great red umbrella nine feet across mounted on a stick seven feet high. The circumference of the handle he surrounded for about two feet by a reed fence in such a way that the rays of the sun were reflected from it and diffused the colour of the umbrella all around. This device pleased Hideyoshi so much that he remitted Hechigwan's taxes as a reward.

CHA-NO-YU: THE JAPANESE TEA CEREMONY, A. L. SADLER, 1962

Because of the light it shines on the other stars which make up a kind of court around it, because of the just and equal distribution of its rays to all alike, because of the good it brings to all places, producing life, joy and action, because of its constancy from which it never varies, I chose the sun as the most magnificent image to represent a great leader.

Louis XIV, the Sun King, 1638-1715

KEYS TO POWER

Using words to plead your case is risky business: Words are dangerous instruments, and often go astray. The words people use to persuade us virtually invite us to reflect on them with words of our own; we mull them over, and often end up believing the opposite of what they say. (That is part of our perverse nature.) It also happens that words offend us, stirring up associations unintended by the speaker.

The visual, on the other hand, short-circuits the labyrinth of words. It strikes with an emotional power and immediacy that leave no gaps for reflection and doubt. Like music, it leaps right over rational, reasonable thoughts. Imagine the Moon Doctor trying to make a case for his medical practice, trying to convince the unconverted by telling them about the healing powers of the moon, and about his own special connection to a distant object in the sky. Fortunately for him, he was able to create a compelling spectacle that made words unnecessary. The moment his patients entered the beer hall, the image of the moon spoke eloquently enough.

Understand: Words put you on the defensive. If you have to explain yourself your power is already in question. The image, on the other hand, imposes itself as a given. It discourages questions, creates forceful associations, resists unintended interpretations, communicates instantly, and forges bonds that transcend social differences. Words stir up arguments and divisions; images bring people together. They are the quintessential instruments of power.

The symbol has the same force, whether it is visual (the statue of Diana) or a verbal description of something visual (the words “the Sun King”). The symbolic object stands for something else, something abstract (such as the image “Diana” standing for chastity). The abstract concept—purity, patriotism, courage, love—is full of emotional and powerful associations. The symbol is a shortcut of expression, containing dozens of meanings in one simple phrase or object. The symbol of the Sun King, as explained by Louis XIV, can be read on many layers, but the beauty of it is that its associations required no explanation, spoke immediately to his subjects,

distinguished him from all other kings, and conjured up a kind of majesty that went far beyond the words themselves. The symbol contains untold power.

The first step in using symbols and images is to understand the primacy of sight among the senses. Before the Renaissance, it has been argued, sight and the other senses—taste, touch, and so on—operated on a relatively equal plane. Since then, however, the visual has come to dominate the others, and is the sense we most depend on and trust. As Gracián said, “The truth is generally seen, rarely heard.” When the Renaissance painter Fra Filippo Lippi was a captured slave among the Moors, he won his freedom by sketching a drawing of his master on a white wall with a piece of charcoal; when the owner saw the drawing, he instantly understood the power of a man who could make such images, and let Fra Lippi go. That one image was far more powerful than any argument the artist could have made with words.

Never neglect the way you arrange things visually. Factors like color, for example, have enormous symbolic resonance. When the con artist Yellow Kid Weil created a newsletter touting the phony stocks he was peddling, he called it the “Red Letter Newsletter” and had it printed, at considerable expense, in red ink. The color created a sense of urgency, power, and good fortune. Weil recognized details like these as keys to deception—as do modern advertisers and mass-marketers. If you use “gold” in the title of anything you are trying to sell, for example, print it in gold. Since the eye predominates, people will respond more to the color than to the word.

The visual contains great emotional power. The Roman emperor Constantine worshipped the sun as a god for most of his life; one day, though, he looked up at the sun, and saw a cross superimposed on it. The vision of the cross over the sun proved to him the ascendancy of the new religion, and he converted not just himself but the whole Roman Empire to Christianity soon thereafter. All the preaching and proselytizing in the world could not have been as powerful. Find and associate yourself with the images and symbols that will communicate in this immediate way today, and you will have untold power.

Most effective of all is a new combination—a fusion of images and symbols that have not been seen together before, but that through their association clearly demonstrate your new idea, message, religion. The creation of new images and symbols out of old ones in this way has a poetic

effect—viewers’ associations run rampant, giving them a sense of participation.

Visual images often appear in a sequence, and the order in which they appear creates a symbol. The first to appear, for instance, symbolizes power; the image at the center seems to have central importance.

Near the end of World War II, orders came down from General Eisenhower that American troops were to lead the way into Paris after its liberation from the Nazis. The French general Charles de Gaulle, however, realized that this sequence would imply that the Americans now commanded the fate of France. Through much manipulation, de Gaulle made certain that he and the French Second Armored Division would appear at the head of the liberating force. The strategy worked: After he had successfully pulled off this stunt, the Allies started treating him as the new leader of an independent France. De Gaulle knew that a leader has to locate himself literally at the head of his troops. This visual association is crucial to the emotional response that he needs to elicit.

Things change in the game of symbols: It is probably no longer possible to pose as a “sun king,” or to wrap the mantle of Diana around you. Yet you can associate yourself with such symbols more indirectly. And, of course, you can make your own mythology out of figures from more recent history, people who are comfortably dead but still powerfully associative in the public eye. The idea is to give yourself an aura, a stature that your normal banal appearance simply will not create. By herself Diane de Poitiers had no such radiant powers; she was as human and ordinary as most of us. But the symbol elevated her above the human lot, and made her seem divine.

Using symbols also has a courtier-like effect, since they are often gentler than brutish words. The psychotherapist Dr. Milton H. Erickson always tried to find symbols and images that would communicate to the patient in ways that words could not. When dealing with a severely troubled patient, he would not question him directly but would talk about something irrelevant, such as driving through the desert in Arizona, where he practiced in the 1950s. In describing this he would eventually come to an appropriate symbol for what he suspected was the man’s problem. If he felt the patient was isolated, say, Dr. Erickson would talk of a single iron-wood tree, and how its isolation left it battered by the winds. Making an emotional connection with the tree as a symbol, the patient would open up more readily to the doctor’s probing.

Use the power of symbols as a way to rally, animate, and unite your troops or team. During the rebellion against the French crown in 1648, those loyal to the king disparaged the rebels by comparing them to the slingshots (in French, *frondes*) that little boys use to frighten big boys. Cardinal de Retz decided to turn this disparaging term into the rebels' symbol: The uprising was now known as the *Fronde*, and the rebels as *frondeurs*. They began to wear sashes in their hats that symbolized the slingshot, and the word became their rallying cry. Without it the rebellion might well have petered out. Always find a symbol to represent your cause—the more emotional associations, the better.

The best way to use images and symbols is to organize them into a grand spectacle that awes people and distracts them from unpleasant realities. This is easy to do: People love what is grand, spectacular, and larger than life. Appeal to their emotions and they will flock to your spectacle in hordes. The visual is the easiest route to their hearts.

Image:

The Cross and the
Sun. Crucifixion and
total radiance. With one
imposed over the other, a
new reality takes shape—
a new power is in the
ascendant. The sym-
bol—no explanation
necessary.

Authority: The people are always impressed by the superficial appearance of things.... The [prince] should, at fitting times of the year, keep the people occupied and distracted with festivities and spectacles. (Niccolò Machiavelli, 1469-1527)

REVERSAL

No power is made available by ignoring images and symbols. There is no possible reversal to this law.