The concentration of control does not come from the mechanization of industry. It comes from the state, which began about a hundred years ago to grant to anyone who paid a nominal fee what had hitherto been a very special privilege. That was the privilege of incorporation with limited liability and perpetual succession.


When the modern corporation burst onto the American scene after the Civil War, one interested though bemused witness – a member of the Massachusetts railroad commission -- called it “a new power, for which our language has no name.” Nor was there an image ready at hand to say what it looked like. The railroad corporations were already transforming the land into a national system of railroad lines. Employing cheap Chinese labor (the “illegal aliens” of back then), government hand-outs, and unscrupulous business practices, a new gang of rapacious entrepreneurs, ‘Robber Barons’ as they came to be known, piled up incredible wealth and political clout; they displayed their power and their apparent impunity with conspicuous disdain for moral or legal judgment.

What to call this new power and how to describe what it looked like became pressing questions. Was the new power – the limited liability corporation -- a material body you could actually see, touch, and describe as an image? Did it possess an inner life you could trust to be always what it seemed to be? Should it be described only by its effects, so many miles of track laid, so many acres of public domain colonized as private rights of way? In the minds of troubled observers, there was neither a familiar word for it nor an image to do it justice.

Whatever you called them or however they seemed to look, the gargantuan railroad corporations enjoyed a privileged existence. Their capital drawn from public trading on the stock market, their investors shielded by limited

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1 Charles Francis Adams writes in *A Chapter of Erie*: “We know what aristocracy, autocracy, democracy are; but we have no word to express government by moneyed corporations” (97). Adams’s elegant sardonic narrative has a place of honor in the history of investigative writing about financial corruption and ruthless corporate power in the first era of the large American corporation.

2 ‘Robber Baron’ harks back to well-born highwaymen (Raubritter) who terrorized travelers in thirteenth century Germany (see Josephson).
liability laws, they behaved like brash, free-wheeling individuals with a will of their own. By the end of the century the courts had ruled that in many regards that’s exactly what they were, juridical persons, fictitious beings but nonetheless real enough when it came to doing business. As for morality, not exactly a major public concern during these ‘gilded’ years of American history, echoes of the Protestant ethos still advocated fairness, honesty, and straight-dealing, values the large corporations in their arrogance mocked as irrelevant to the business of business. By the end of the 19th century embattled farmers and workers had had enough, and, along with small businessmen and their allies in the independent press, they pinned new words on the by now entrenched corporate power: malefactors, predators, behemoths of greed and corruption. The genie of new wealth had become an ogre. An image appeared as if spontaneously: top-hatted, cigar-puffing Mr. Moneybags, clutching overstuffed sacks of coins against his bloated belly, a smug look on his face. Here was the latest guise of the old Satan.

Since early in the twentieth century corporations have strived to replace this image of elemental demonic greed with more benign images, though in one variant or the other (e.g., CEOs in handcuffs) Mr. Moneybags still lurks nearby, never entirely expunged, always threatening to reemerge. But self-styled corporate images very quickly won the upper hand, in newspaper and magazine advertising, on billboards, on radio and television, subliminally in cinema, and in the packaging of goods; clad in images, commodities became imaged messages that sold the corporate name and the idea of corporate goodness along with the packaged product. A history of images of the large corporation, images pro and con, would make for an astonishing document of on-going controversy and combat over the moral character and effects of ‘big business,’ one of the popular euphemism for the power of moneyed corporations. Such a history would also shed light on a neglected implication of Nicholas Murray Butler’s provocative remark in 1911, “the limited liability corporation is the greatest single discovery of modern times,” namely the corporate recruitment of visual culture as the mark of its presence and the sign of its dominance. By its image-making, the large corporation proves itself a major agent of cultural change, along with its more obvious social, economic, and political effects. As an agent of culture the corporation has been a double-edged force; just as images speak and keep silent at once, corporate images both reveal and conceal, its concealments being its most illuminating revelations. Its “greatest single discovery” (Butler) may well be the force of paradox, its cycle of creative destruction, tearing down while building up, which is the inner dynamic of corporate life.

Do the corporate images which the self-image companies wish to portray show what corporations actually look like – their defining visage? The self-defensive motive of these self-images is most often hidden, their goal of purging any trace of moneybags tucked carefully out of sight. This is what ‘slick’ means, that the rhetoric of the image be inconspicuous, its implicit argument against a negative view of corporate morality not openly acknowl-
edged. A first step in reading corporate self-images should be, then, to re-
store the argument, to bring the absent negative back into view. Corporate
Images, Inc., a firm that sells “perception management,” explains its service
like this: “A corporate image [is] the sum of the impressions that stakehold-
ers (like customers, vendors, employees and the public) hold about your
company.” The “ideal corporate image” is “congruent” – “what they see is
what you are.” This ideal “sum of all impressions” constitutes the client-
company’s “brand equity.” It’s not only true (“what you are”) but is some-
thing marketable (never mind the apparent contradiction), convertible into
cash, not exactly what the company sells but what enables the company to
sell anything at all: stakeholder confidence. Better than words alone — sense
experience always trumps abstract verbalizations – visual images can achieve
convincing “congruence.” It’s a matter of seeing and believing what you see.3

But it’s not this simple. Images are usually multivalent, polysemous, and
ambiguous; they mean too much at once. When it comes to visual images,
Isn’t there often something left over and something unsaid? Images pose
dangers of misrepresentation.4 With corporate images the problem is height-
ened by the ambiguity of the corporation in the first place, the fact that it
owes its existence not to something describable as an object but to a legal
process. At bottom the corporation has no inherent and definitive look. It can
start out as one thing and quickly morph into another. Strip away trad-
emarks, logos, typeface, color schemes, the entire branding apparatus of ad-
vertising, and what’s left? Is there anything there? The word corporation
comes from the Latin, corpus or ‘body,’ which implies something tangible,
fixed in space, a thing you can kick as well as see, a sensible thing. Yet begin
to describe what a corporation is and you find yourself awash in abstractions
like juridical or fictional persons, fictions consisting of imagined abstract
relations among natural persons, relations fixed by a power that lies outside
the body we want to describe. It’s the sight or image of exactly that intangible
thing that we want to put into words.

Corporations owe their existence to law, an array of words that initiate
processes; they exist at all only if a state legislative body (another kind of
corporate entity) has ruled that such and such a group of individuals, joined
together for purposes of commerce, can call themselves a single entity or
body, a corporation, and enjoy legal recognition as such. Legislatures charter
such groups, and the charter, a written text filed away in some ‘official’ (san-
tioned by the state) location, constitutes the sole ground on which the group
can imagine itself as behaving as if it were a body unto itself. As Chief Justice
John Marshall declared long ago but famously in the 1819 Dartmouth College
decision, a corporation is an “artificial being, invisible, intangible and exist-

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4 Among many recent works addressed to the elusive fact of ‘the image,’ Jacque Ranci-
ere’s The Future of the Image (2007), is one of the best, especially the discussion of the rela-
tion between images and speech, “between the sayable and the visible” (7).
ing only in contemplation of law” (Trachtenberg 82-83). Marshall’s words
may seem a bit paradoxical today: General Motors, about to go belly-up,
invisible? Still, corporations in the news are no less generically invisible and
intangible for making headlines.

An account of what a corporation is can entirely dispense with saying or
even speculating about a corporation’s physical appearance. There’s no rea-
son even to try to say what any particular company looks like as long as you’re
talking about what it is, its mode of existence. It’s a given that courts have
ruled corporations to be (or have) ‘personality,’ that they stand in many re-
gards (certainly not all) before the law is if an actual or ‘natural’ person. Law
asks that this fictitious or imaginary entity take a name -- in some states a
number will do, carrying abstraction to another degree -- and an address, a
location in space, but not any necessary appearance, no particular visage, no
distinctive look. Born of law into a universe ruled by words and the proce-
dures they govern, the corporation might be imagined as an outwardly inert
thing, something like that inscrutable jar in Wallace Stevens’s poem: “The jar
was gray and bare./It did not give of bird or bush.” But still, “it took domin-
ion everywhere.” Like the jar, the corporation begins life as an abstract form,
“round upon the ground/ And tall and of a port in air.” Against the “sloven-
ly wilderness” of the hill in Tennessee where Steven’s “Anecdote of a Jar” is
set, the jar in its abstractness, its perfect roundness, proffers a principle of
order such as cannot be found in ‘slovenly’ nature but only in human arti-
facts, constructions of form of which law and poetry are supreme examples
along with perfectly symmetrical jars, pots, and other fictions.

Hardly exact, the analogy between corporate form and poetic tropes such
as Stevens’s jar (or even his ‘supreme fiction’) goes at least part of the way
toward explaining why being unencumbered by any determinative images at
its point of origin can be a tremendous source of power for corporations. A
new being has emerged under the seal of law, a fiction engendered by words
and the implicit police power behind them, a written abracadabra: bodiless,
imageless, a mere device set in motion by a charter to perform acts of com-
merce – buying, selling, the getting of wealth and/or losing it. Does the de-
vice have a material identity, a substance and form we can always tell is this
thing and not another? A simple way to affirm that corporations are tangible
is to identify the company with its outward properties of name, address,
physical possessions and appurtenances. But, as John Dewey recognized in a
brilliant essay in 1926, once you grant corporations the status of judicial “per-
sonality” or “personhood,” you empower them with “the unlimited elasticity
of fictions.” For, “imaginary creatures are notoriously nimble” (667).

Corporations per se, then, are invisible except as words in a charter and
perhaps a diagram, a flow-chart of internal organization. Not much to see,
though the flow chart might be considered a kind of image. Without visibility
in their own right, corporations have images, graphic signs they possess as
protected property, visual signs like trademarks, logos, seals, labels, distinct-
tive typeface and color scheme. And the mass of ads they buy to distribute
and circulate. Corporations create domains of visibility for themselves. Images give the corporation a public face for internal as well as external relations. And further, by virtue of that imaged or imaginary face, commerce becomes possible. Images provide outer vestments through which fictitious persons become competitive players in the marketplace. Hence corporate images are second-order facts, not present at the point of origin but essential for the chartered body to fulfill its purposes as maker, buyer, seller and purveyor of goods and services. The generic aim of the generic corporation is to serve the bottom line, and in pursuit of that, images prove as fundamental to the business corporation as its abstract statutory form.

Visit any internet stock photography site, enter ‘corporation’ and the ensuing flood gives you a panorama of images by subject and by style that are deemed to proclaim ‘corporation.’ Here you can find virtually every stereotype of furnishings, posture, gesture – typically an office place or an office activity like lunch time meetings in a pub, conversation in the lobby, cell phone messaging on the street. Choose the exact picture that fits how you want your company’s ‘mission’ or its ‘culture’ to be seen or imagined. Take your pick: a soaring tall building in reflective glass, an office interior in soft colors, lots of wood showing, rows of cubicles signifying ‘busy as a hive.’ Or contrive your own design according to the best advice you can buy from specialists in image management and customer relations. What you want is a credible image, not necessarily a true image. Credible is perfect for the function, which is to cloth the naked generic money-making corporation in softer, perhaps familial or communal tones. Make it seem friendly enough for consumers ardently to desire to do business with it, to wear its label, to receive monthly bills stamped with its logos. Not truth but effectiveness, a matter of the bottom line.

Are corporate images not to be trusted? As a rule, better to be on guard whenever anything visual entices the eye; better to know what you’re buying before you seal the deal. Then, too, the diversity of meanings attached to ‘image’ should give us pause before we leap to any conclusions about the use of the term or specific image-effects. By image do we mean a likeness, a semblance of something that exists apart from reflection or imitation as image? Or do we mean a made-up figure, a signifier without a signified? Or an image presented so as to persuade you it is a real thing rather than a picture of something, hence a simulacrum, a simulation, a deceit? An image might stand toward its referent not as a copy or likeness but as a symbol or conventional emblem, like company logos. We have verbal images as well as graphic images. Any figure of speech, metaphor, simile, or metonymy, qualifies as image. Mirrors give off images as reflections. Images can be caught on the fly, cast off from shiny surfaces; they can be mental impressions, as when we speak of the kind of image a public figure makes or the image we have of a

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5 The cubicle form is a major integer of the moral universe of the corporation. See the important essay by David Franz, “The Moral Life of Cubicles” (2008); cf. Schlosser.
political party or a section of town – or of a brand of beer or underwear. Just as corporations require images in order to compete in the marketplace, so do commodities; both take on (or put on) image identities to disguise themselves as something other than what they are, something more or something less.

The word image rolls off the tongue so easily and falls comfortably into place in our sentences, but since the 1960s, with the expansion of visual mass media and the work of Marshall McLuhan (“the medium is the message”) and others, image has emerged as a loaded, often tortured keyword of our times. In 1961 the historian Daniel Boorstin unleashed a screed against “the Image,” nemesis of the traditional role of “ideals” in American life, the role of courage, bravery, fortitude in face of “reality,” a concept giving way rapidly to “illusions” propagated by “the Image.” In a scolding tone reminiscent of seventeenth century Puritan jeremiads, Boorstin raises fears of America’s invisible foes: “We are haunted, not by reality, but by those images we put in place of reality” (6). Is there something suspiciously ‘un-American’ about images? America suffers from a surfeit of her success, too much progress, too much prosperity, too many goods. We have created our own demons. The corporate image, he writes, is “the most elaborately and expensively contrived of the images of our age” (184). Nostalgia for a lost ideal world fills his lamentation with a sense of futility. Boorstin worries about the disjunction between corporate images and what he calls truth, a literal picture of the plain facts. He finds it symptomatic that companies try hard to live up to the images they contrive, rather than the other around. “An image is a visible public ‘personality’ as distinguished from an inward private ‘character’” (197). Boorstin writes as if he believes, though not with much conviction, that lost ideals can be recovered and the lost America restored simply by the screwing up national resolve.

Other critics are less sanguine that hegemony of ‘the Image’ is a result simply of bad judgment and erosion of character. In Keywords (1976) Raymond Williams remarks that older uses of ‘image’ have been overtaken by the new force of “publicity,” which links image with “perceived reputation” whether of a brand or a politician. It has become “a jargon term of commercial advertising and public relations” (130-131). New technologies of reproduction play a major role in analyses of the newly acquired power of the image. Reality has seemed displaced or dissolved or colonized by images as thin as acetate film, images floating in emulsion, images constructed of pixels, digital fabrications with no necessary source in what they depict or imitate as faux likenesses. But behind the cameras and the computers stands the corporation, the master shape-shifter of our era, always in quest of further domination of market and world.

In the ‘punk’ sci-fi classic, Neuromancer, author William Gibson imagines that giant holograms floating in the night skies will be the billboards of the near future, blurring the edge where sky ends and corporate image begins. In the acclaimed sci-fi and film noir thriller, Blade Runner, confusion between culture and nature, between the image and the real, arrives at an ultimate
plateau. Based on Phillip Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, the film focuses on that blurred edge between lie and the imitation of life in the figure of the “replicant,” a humanoid robot manufactured by a corporation as slave laborers on an outlying colony in space. Created in the image of human beings, fictional persons like corporations themselves, the replicants push against the fragile border between the real and the fictive. Novel and film look with some horror on the image-making function of corporations, yet also raise new questions about old ideas of personhood, nature, and culture.

Novelist Don DeLillo has also made the irreality of image worlds a major theme. Photography, television, cinema, and the internet pose threatening challenges, seeming to sap reality from what they depict or imitate. Images or simulacra increasingly seem ends in themselves, secondary realities that increasingly seem to assert a power of their own. DeLillo views the menacing image-world as a function of the corporate world and its will toward domination. In the dissolution of the very conception of the old ‘reality,’ some historians see paradoxical opportunities for radical re-thinking of social and personal terms like self, gender, society, person. Some historians argue that consumer culture, in which the image rules supreme, offers liberating prospects by enabling people to reimagine and realize their lives by choosing from among far wider options and resources than ever before (see Livingstone, *Pragmatism*). The rule of the image might well mark the demise of regimes of repression and inequality, if, as John Dewey argued, society could be led to realize the new egalitarian implications of the collective and corporate forms in the realms of production and distribution but not yet in social relations and in personal development of human capacities. Dewey took the corporation as an educative force, teaching skills and values of coordinated labor; it harbored seeds of individual liberation – a “new individualism.” Yet, the new remained dominated by old values of profit-seeking and narrow possessive individualism, the repressive individualism of class rule.

What do images have to do with the moral life of corporations and with its educative influences? Can anything be gleaned from corporate uses of images about the positive possibilities of corporate forms stressed by Dewey, the harmonizing and liberating values they subliminally inculcate? It’s through images that corporations perform their business and therefore can be said to have a moral life. Images are what we mean when we speak of the moral life of corporations; we can only speak of what is perceptible. How are companies seen by others, how do they see themselves? An image can be a picture in the mind based on an actual visual perception, a sense experience,

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7. For the argument that images have usurped realities and have left only “simulations” in place of “the real,” see Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* (1996 [1985]).
or an artifact, perhaps in words, or photograph or sketch or painting, an object which makes a distinct portion of the world visible, makes it seem present, gives it imaginable reality. Images might be pure examples of visual experience but they embody thoughts as well as sights, they fuse pictures with ideas. In most common usage images of corporations are interpretations, usually of a moral or political sort. And in recent years, interpretations typically embody the severe judgment that corporations foster, shelter, and perhaps inherently enable corruption, criminality, and social pathology.9

The first sentence of Joel Bakan’s book foregrounds the increasingly prominent use of image as a keyword: “as images of disgraced and handcuffed corporate executives parading across our television screens [...].” Yet while these too-familiar images (they’re all about Enron) fall distressfully into the intimate spaces of our lives, “pundits, politicians, and business leaders are quick to assure us that greedy and corrupt individuals, not the system as a whole, are to blame for Wall Street’s woes” (1). One set of images begets another. Bakan shows that in the wake of public fear and anger stirred by the massive “merger movement” early in the 20th century, AT&T inaugurated the first of what would become a standard feature of corporate life, an advertising campaign aimed at countering negative pictures of a soulless monster with positive images of a harmonious corporate family, good neighbor and responsible citizen of nation and world. The use of actual employees in these comforting ads gave them an air of plausible reality (17-18).

The battle over the moral character of the corporation, over the good or the evil of big business, pits image against image, visual text against visual text. Starting early in the last century the makers of corporate self-images have honed the skill of disguising self-interest as public interest, rendering the corporate world as natural, inevitable, attractive, perfectly fit to the order of things. The skill lies in disarming the viewer’s critical eye by hiding the rhetoric of the image, its subliminal ideological message, in the pleasure of the performance.10 The viewer’s skill in critical reading of the message lies in deducing from internal and external clues the context of embattlement the image presumes, the presumed opposition to which the image responds without mentioning it. Corporate self-images typically sublimate the unacknowledged debate within which they take an interested position.

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10 For examples of critical readings that free the message from the image by analyzing its semantic and ideological structure. See Barthes, “The Rhetoric of the Image” (1977) & Mythologies (1972 [1957]).
Can we tell from this image alone – a cartoon-like line drawing of a scene with three figures, two chairs, a water-cooler, three windows, and a wall in an enclosed space – that this is an argument against the idea that corporate jets are unseemly luxuries, signs of corrupt CEOs? By itself the image might be taken as a silent moment in a narrative centered on a conversation between two men draped casually around a water-cooler. Is the topic of the conversation something we wonder about? Is it something we need to know to make sense of the image? Isn’t it necessary only to know that there is a conversation on some matter of interest going on in this tilted space? They both look intent, yet an air of relaxation suffuses the scene; the seat on the left looks inviting and a third figure reclines in a seat on the right, eyes closed, neck pillowed in one of those noose-like contraptions that, together with the tilt of the floor of the room-like space, gives it away as the interior of a small aircraft. Why is it that we can tell even before we read the title of the New York Times Op-Ed page article the image accompanies – “The Mile-High Office” – that this is a “corporate jet?” The signals are not difficult to deci-
pher; we’re conditioned to associate offices, white men in suits, shirts and ties, easy chairs, and water-coolers, with corporate offices, and corporations (it’s a matter of current events) with small private jet airplanes. And the title echoes the quixotic Frank Lloyd Wright design in 1956 for a “Mile High Skyscraper;” it was never built but by association the title transfers the idea-image of a skyscraper to the cozy little cabin in the sky. The play of image and word evokes the unspoken and unpictured figure of the skyscraper, the favorite icon of corporate power. We know then where we really are.

How does this pleasant if somewhat ambiguous little scene in the sky serve the argument of the Op-Ed piece? The article opens: “Business jets are a force for good. Really.” That conversational “really” packs a wallop. This is a no-nonsense piece of opinionate editorial say-so, about jets, business, corporate offices high in the sky; the title alludes obviously to skyscraper office towers. “Force for good,” to which the “really” refers, plants the ‘opinion’ firmly in the discourse of morality, ‘good’ taking its meaning from an unspoken assumption of what and where ‘the good’ is. The jet represents a choice on the part of corporations – Citibank, in particular, is mentioned – to serve ‘the good,’ to be good. The author, William Garvey, editor-in-chief of Business and Commercial Aviation, chides Citibank for its craven cancellation of delivery of a $42 million jet. The facts adduced in support of ‘moral’ good against ‘moralistic’ indignation are 1) “more than a million people are employed manufacturing, maintaining, flying and managing business aircraft;” 2) the industry thus contributes $150 billion to the American economy (hence, “force for good”); 3) if we don’t watch out, foreign manufacturers, who in any honest contest are “utterly trounced by American ingenuity and craftsmanship,” are likely to get an edge in market competition (e.g., don’t hurt our own guys by bad-mouthing their product); 4) a business jet is, after all, “merely a tool” (11).

This brings us back to the image. According to the accompanying text, what the “The Mile-High Office” image gives us to see and believe is that the business jet is “merely a tool,” an instrument rather than end in itself. But a tool for what? Easy conversation, stretching your legs, catching a snooze? The article fills in one of the ‘goods’ the jet serves: because it can choose among many more public-use runways than commercial airlines, “[i]f two companies are competing for business, the one using a business aircraft can fly directly to one of those smaller airports and get to lunch with the client before the other guys taking the commercial airline show up.” It’s Poor Richard over again, the early bird, the worms, and so on. It’s all about delivering the goods in more senses than one. Moreover, your own guys will show up “better prepared” – they’ll have had the advantage of laying plans in confidence, polishing their PowerPoint spiels, private use of phone, internet, and Blackberry. “These jets,” in short, “are offices that move.” And the image shows this in at least two ways. The downward tilt conveys descending motion (perhaps a sly touch on the artist’s part?); look at the water level in the cooler; the standing figures, proper corporate types by the look of their cloth-
ing, balance themselves nicely. They are in the groove. Corporate men know how to keep steady when turbulence rocks the office boat. The ship may be going down, but it will surely be a safe landing.

In addition to the rhetorical purpose of defending the corporate jet against charges of profligate waste and insensitive display, the image works too in less obvious ways. One is its picture of ‘office’ as a place of ‘work.’ Lounging and chatting by the water cooler? The article mentions phones, Blackberries and PowerPoint. No sign of these, nor of other tools of office work. Is their absence itself a sign? Also absent are desks, no hint of cubicles, that pervasive product of the corporate version of rationality (see Franz). Nor any sign of corporate hierarchies (they go with cubicles), the top-down flow of power within corporations that make them perhaps the least democratic of institutions in American life. These absences are glaringly visible. Are they telling? Also absent, needless to say, are those mentioned in the article among the millions of people employed by the business jet industry, including factory workers and mechanics. Between blue and white collars there seems no visible link. A cozy spruced up self-image of the corporate work-place, high in the sky and apparently coming in for a landing.

A second hint insinuated by “office that moves” is that the corporate form reproduces itself anywhere; it can move with apparent ease from ground to sky, from space to space, because it has no essential location, no single set of dimensions or necessary shape. It has indeed no essential or necessary or inevitable visual image. ‘Corporate image’ gets attached to ‘corporate form,’ an abstraction whose initial and originating embodiment is a written document, a license, a charter, a set of legal terms laying out conditions that enable the group of persons that form the ‘corporation’ to do business as if, in many ways, it were a natural person. The unspoken insinuation of the mile-high office image is that the corporate form gives companies license to project themselves as whatever and wherever they wish to be, whatever they believe will further the ‘good’ they represent. The op-ed article identifies ‘good’ with an edge in competition for customers, for sales, for profit: the everyday struggle the fierceness of which is belied by the guise of ease, calm, security, confidence, as the tiny aircraft tilts downward, back toward the business of business. “If you truly need to be there and there and there and back by seven,” Mr. Garvey confides reassuringly, “aircraft may provide the only way.” The point strikes home: offices a mile high rule the market, not to say the world. Get on board!

Corporate images make us wonder whether we can expect new ideas of the good to come from within corporations as we currently know them. Change will take collective desire for a different kind of corporate look, a change of garment and face more thorough than the term ‘reform’ usually implies. What’s needed before anything else is a revived regulatory regime. That will take a new collective will to redefine the corporate mission in a way that chastens the private profit motive with a vision of public responsibility. Is this imaginable, replacing the bottom line with the social good? The earli-
est charters of corporations in the U.S. – for roads, bridges, canals -- had in mind subordination of private profit to the public profit of improved infrastructure and social well-being.

To return to this original understanding of the function of corporations – public ends served by authorized private means under democratic control--would be literally to re-form corporations in basic ways, toward participation with other corporate bodies, including non-business bodies and the multiple publics of the citizenry in civil society, in a democratic process of deciding where the social good lies, what sort of negotiations among interested parties need to be undertaken to seek out that good and to pursue and to effect it. Rather than instruments of collective ends as originally envisioned, corporations have been shelters and instigators of anti-social and anti-democratic behavior, to put it mildly. Mile-high salaries, extravagant bonuses, stock options, bribery of all sort: in these is the look of dangerous pathology. It has rarely been clearer that the business of business is everyone’s business; boundary lines between public and private have to be redrawn; indeed the corporation has already redrawn the lines, only for selfish private gain rather than for democracy.

It’s a tautology to say that corporate images directed outward to the public serve inward-turning private ends. But the same images have insights to offer to those who read against the grain. They can be taken apart in ways that undercut their message simply by exposing it. Such readings can spur us to imagine other ways of doing business. By paradox corporate images can help show a way and provide a method and a weapon to bring alternative ends forward. The first step is to overcome the spell of the image, then to brush against its grain to see what counter-image or alternative picture lies concealed in plain view on the surface. By their visage shall they ever be known. In the domain of the image there is always more than meets the eye.11

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