

A picture is worth a thousand words but...

IF I were asked what made the most impression on me lately, what would spring to mind is a series of vivid images rolled out with kaleidoscopic but chilling effect.

First and most shameful, the sight of the well-known features of the former prime minister contorted in agony from a pepper spray. A barbarous act.

This is an 81-year-old man, for goodness sake. Aren't Malaysians supposed to respect the tribal elders? It recalled another image. There was a time this country was represented around the world by just one picture of a black eye.

Today, we have pix inflation. Daily, we are treated to the horrifying spectacle of utter devastation on a wider scale, be it Lebanon or Iraq.

Again, reminiscent of those gruesome scenes of the Auschwitz concentration camp. It is no longer the faces of film stars and bimbos we see in the centrefold but the faces of human grief and suffering.

And currently we have the descent from the tragic to the distasteful. The singer who has ironically chosen the stage name "Madonna" now chooses to re-enact the crucifixion as part of her act, complete with a crown of thorns and suspended from a fake cross. Sensationalism is here to stay.

Suddenly, watching the World Cup and staying up til 3am seems a healthy pursuit rather than male folly. But even that was spoiled by that notorious head-butt graphically captured on TV. What a curious sight.



Have I missed something?

Since when has this rather awkward looking act of aggression replaced good old fashioned fisticuffs? I now know the true meaning of "hard-headed".

The Digital Age has accomplished the death of distance. This was brought home to us early on when a man on a balcony with an ever-ready camera captured the sight of LA's "finest", its police force, with the emphasis on the word "force", beating up one Rodney King. The clip went round the World and what would have been a short-lived local scandal became an international outrage.

A picture is worth a thousand words. I even feel inadequate when I mount a platform without PowerPoint. As a technical virgin, this is an accomplishment I don't possess.

We can never underestimate the power of visuals. It succeeds because it is instant and undemanding, which is why people are addicted to comics.

Our most astute (and boldest) political commentator is Lat. His drawings say it all, often dispensing entirely with words. Cartoonists favour caricature, distorting the features of their subjects, politicians being the favourite target, especially if they are



Abdullah's prominent feature is his smile. For Dr Mahathir, his nose gets singled out and magnified by cartoonist Lat.

possessed of a particularly prominent feature.

In Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's case, his nose gets singled out and magnified. In Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's case, he is visibly identified — naturally — by his smile, the most, engaging attribute of an engaging personality.

And what has put Malaysia on the map is the yearly F1 race watched by 23 million viewers around the world.

We are also branded by our distinctive buildings — the KLIA, the Twin 'lowers, Menara KL, Penang Bridge, etc. Appearances matter.

But the power of the visual can be a deadly weapon. Sept 11, 2001 was a deliberately staged spectacle — indelibly printed on my memory, as intended. Terrorism is theatre.

The carnage of the present hostilities in the Middle East is the visible calling card meant to repel and intimidate.

The power of words complements this, especially with the new breed of adversarial journalists and the machinations of the spin doctors.

There is a controversy at present about the level of free speech in our society. Seeing all the lurid coverage on a daily basis of political goings-on, can anyone really doubt that we don't have a much freer Press now?

Nor is there anything new about debate. It goes on all the time in coffee houses, the mosques on Fridays, the kampungs and the cocktail party circuit. We are a lively democracy.

Once, the power of words found its highest expression in a great tradition of oratory. Many examples have gone down in history. Most schoolboys can quote the famous words of the Gettysburg Address.

But do they know that on that occa-

sion, Abraham Lincoln was not the only speaker? A man called Everett spoke for 40 minutes and nobody remembers a word he said. Lincoln spoke for only eight minutes and went down in history with the words: "Government of the people, for the people, by the people."

Winston Churchill practically won the Second World War with his power of oratory. I remember "Blood, toil, tears and sweat" or the stirring words: "Wis shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

The cadences echo those of Lincoln. Meanwhile, on the opposite side, Hitler's oratory was persuasive enough to inspire a fundamentally decent nation to genocide.

However, the days of flamboyant speech and oratory have given way to the more fast-paced world of the 21st century. Just as we don't need those long volumes any more of Dickens and Scott — no time, we prefer a "digest" — communications resort to taglines.

In the competing jungle of the media and all the noise pollution, the more memorable these are, the better to get attention — "the work ethic", "Malaysia Inc", "Cool Britannia" and best of all "Vision 2020".

We've also developed a T-shirt lexicon — the messages blazoned on the young, front and back, can be most extraordinary. It's like a language from another planet.

Politicians, meanwhile, try to come up with the mantra that will brand them — J.F. Kennedy's "ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country" or George W. Bush's "my way or the

highway".

Words, mind you, can also entrap. The same JFK, in Berlin wishing to present himself as a citizen of the world, said: "*Ich bin ein Berliner*". Unfortunately, he was unaware that a "Berliner" in German parlance is a "cream bun".

One English politician had reason to regret the phrase he invented — "rivers of blood" — to predict the consequences of foreign immigration. This branded him racist.

Misunderstandings — can easily arise. The United States and United Kingdom have been described as divided by a common language.

If I have an assignation and the person fails to show up, I say he has "let me down". The Americans would say he has "stood me up". English parliamentary candidates "stand" for office, their American counterparts "run" for theirs, being more vigorous, we are to presume.

Ingenuity with word invention is a modern art — "Watergate", "Monicagate", to say nothing of "embedded" journalists in Iraq who sound like a species no self-respecting girl should fraternise with.

"Collateral damage" euphemises for the "massacre of the innocent". And changing "French fries" to "Freedom fries" in the US is a rather juvenile way of registering displeasure with France, by means of a potato.

So one could go on. What's in a word? But these are times when there can be no cause for ambiguity. The Israelis may prevaricate, talking of looking to "a sustainable peace" i.e. buying time. There is nothing equivocal in what Malaysia, and what the Organisation of the Islamic Conference here, recently demanded: An immediate ceasefire.