Jo Spence: Beyond the Perfect Image

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Photography, Ideology, Education (1)

It has not been until fairly recently that photography has been used in any systematic way inside the state education system except as a recording medium, or else "creativity" in art projects as a means of self-expression. Gradually, as the power and prestige of visual media have been recognised, moves have been made by the professional bodies representing photography in this country to incorporate photography into the curriculum, which has culminated in the setting up of some O- and A-level examinations. (2) Thus the seeds have been sown for the institutionalisation of photography as a subject area in its own right. (Some of the problems and dangers of this development have been discussed in *Screen Education*. (3)) However, what is even more important is that the institutions that validate photographic examinations have hardly touched on the medium's ideological role, or even on the inherent bias involved in the act of taking, editing and mass-reproducing photographs. Generally, criticism still basically revolves around 19th-century aesthetics, commercialism, codes of conduct and a continuing fight for professional status. The notion that photographs are "realistic" is deeply entrenched and rarely challenged except on film and mass-media courses.

The appeal of the relatively new outlet for photography inside schools can be seen in the eagerness with which many children opt for visual expression via photography, film, and video, in preference to straight language work. Visual literacy is slowly moving into the classroom, but as we know, the learning of visual syntax, or "universal" systems of decoding images, will not necessarily reveal the inherent bias of both the form and the content of any given image, any more than bias in literature will be revealed through the learning of English grammar, or the superficial study of the novel. Photographs are still assumed to be evidence from which a whole range of "universal" conclusions can be drawn, and children themselves can easily produce photographs as evidence of what they "see", Useful as this may be as an initial step, it cannot be emphasised enough that a photograph used alone can only reveal surface information, and additionally, that text can drastically change such apparent meaning. For example, an image of a fox hunt supported by the caption "A Meeting of the Unemployed" may have a subversive effect on what was a British Tourist Authority publicity shot. (fig. 1)

Even allowing for the photographer's best intentions, it must also be stated that if the operator of a camera lacks information (wilfully or not) about the social and economic organisation of the society in which they live, and therefore doesn't possess a coherent political critique and understanding of the social relations of production (what is sometimes termed "false consciousness"), then any photographs taken by that person must reflect that lack of awareness. Similarly, if when a photograph is viewed the spectator also operates from such a limited perspective, then there is no way in which they can discern the fact that they are looking at only one aspect of "reality".

False consciousness arises from the compartmentalisation, mystification and bias of "knowledge" and as such encourages the inculcation of dominant values which place one area of experience in superiority to all others, thereby invalidating the experience of oppressed groups, bringing about a resultant lack of motivation on their part to redress the balance. These feelings we see as reflecting a society that encourages the cult of individual achievement, competition and hierarchies. One example of the way dominant values can be institutionalised by the examination system and compounded by the mass media through illustration can be seen in fig. 2. The inculcation of such values relies on the use of sexist, racist and culturally biased Standard English (4) in the teaching of literacy, linked to

stereotyped imagery which claims to present a "universal" view of the world. Seen in this context it immediately becomes vital to understand who controls whom, and which social group one seems to be assigned to in this process. But for children this is no simple matter. To start with they have very few "rights", and those they do have are usually founded on their immediate needs, e.g. adequate housing, living with "caring adults", and on the long-term needs of the state, e. g. compulsory education and health care. The quality and quantity they receive of any of these will depend on their social class, sex and race. The right to have their own culture, history, language and social customs respected and revealed, the right to be validated, is in no way the concern of a state agency like the educational establishment.

Most schooling is still largely concerned with the teaching of history and science as the deeds of "Great Men", and the wonders of industry and technology; with biology that describes the functions of the body in a perfunctory and mechanistic fashion – sexual needs or "norms" are rarely explained and explored; a geography that celebrates the "discovery" of rivers, lands and resources, thereby ignoring the existence of those natural features for the indigenous people long before "explorers" (colonists) so flagrantly renamed and commandeered everything, cataloguing whole continents and their peoples for our ease of learning. Children's text books and reading materials are not concerned with the work and social experience of the masses, but those who have enough leisure, time, power, and wealth to prescribe what is culturally acceptable. Where the experience of working-class life is shown it is usually a negatively stereotyped view which only reinforces existing social divisions. The dominant class views itself, via its art forms, as the purveyors of good taste.

We believe that many of these attitudes and values in our society come about because of the following interlocking structures of oppression:

Patriarchy: systematic discrimination on the grounds of sex – i. e. sexism
Capitalism: systematic discrimination on the grounds of class – i. e. classism
Imperialism: systematic discrimination on the grounds of race – i. e. racism

That is to say that oppression is not simply a matter of class discrimination between groups, or sex or race discrimination between others. It is a mixture of all three, the balance of which is constantly shifting. However, the fundamental oppression still remains a matter of one's class.

If we take these three structures as a starting point, any teaching must examine their historical roots, relating them to the inherent bias in language, illustrations, views of history and science. We can then move on to secondary complexities like the various theories about "human nature", which (according to the particular mixture of personal beliefs we hold, or to the dominant theories in favour at any given period of history) will further influence our view of the world.

In most social and economic relationships there is a basic antagonism between these who have the power to make decisions and have them carried out, linked to those who have the authority to carry out such decisions – and those who have neither the power nor the authority. One of the most effective methods of socialisation and control is the use of archetypes / stereotypes (both positive and negative) as a means of conveying information from one group to another, often mediated by a middle group. Some stereotypes have become so systematised and well established that they now appear to reflect "reality", An archetype is a representation of a unique, original idea or value. A stereotype is a reproduction of an original which becomes more and more diluted, distorted or fragmented the further removed it is from the archetype or original. But archetypes / stereotypes are not just things in themselves; like everything else, they only exist within relationships between each other, and between the "manufacturer" / "distributor" and the "consumer" (or that is to say between capitalist mass media and various art forms, and the audience), and will vary from culture to

culture. The type of stereotype used will, or course, depend on who is sending and who is receiving the message. Gordon W. Allport writes:

> "Stereotyping is a form of biased presentation [...] a stereotype is an exaggerated belief, associated with a category. Its function is to justify [...] our conduct in relation to the category [...] It is sustained by selective perception and selective forgetting, and is socially supported, continually revived and hammered in, by our media of mass communication." (5)

New archetypes are gradually developed in the course of the struggle of groups to become dominant, and will contain a combination of those elements of the existing archetypes/stereotypes which can usefully be assimilated and used, plus fundamentally new elements which are unique to the rising social group. Figure 3 offers an interesting example of an incorporation of symbols and arche- / stereotypes of the dominant group by a group engaged in the early stages of a struggle. Representation of labour, in this case the National Amalgamated Sailors' and Firemans' Unions (1891), are crowned by a mystical religious symbol. Often, in the course of further development, such a group will, as a result of a careful and thorough analysis of their situation, develop a more coherent position and identity, enabling them to throw away the crutch of out-dated symbolism and role reversals, thus achieving a greater political awareness. During this process they may also have negatively stereotyped and invalidated the existing dominant ideology. One interesting example of this process can be illustrated through the work of the photo-montagist John Heartfield.

With the development of mass communication, the mechanics of this process have become better understood and there is now the potential for conscious commercial exploitation of this phenomenon, as can for instance be seen in many contemporary children's books with their increasing depiction of women and girls in traditionally bourgeois white male roles. Exploitation can, however, be recuperated, as instanced in the expanding number of role reversals of Blacks in popular cinema. These do not represent the archetypes of actual Black struggle, but rather create "new" black stereotypes invested with the properties of the more decadent aspects of white culture.

Stereotyping in children's books and cartoons
Long before photography and film had established a hold on our minds, cartoonists, illustrators etc had developed a highly evolved method of conveying stereotyped information. Figure 4 presents a positive stereotype which has been filtered down to us through myth and fairy tale, through various stages of historical development. As seen here in a mass-circulation children's book, Sleeping Beauty epitomises the good fairy, the virgin and fertility, merging the prince with the bride, signifying the validity of woman as the central pillar of the nuclear family, perpetuator of patriarchal capitalism's values of wealth, purity, beauty, attainment, power, etc. The bride, though instantly recognisable in a 20th-century depiction, is surrounded by medieval trappings and costumes.

On the other hand, the cartoons illustrated base their stereotyping on "reality", showing us (like the photograph) one aspect which we are encouraged to accept as the whole story. Figure 5 presents a typical negative example of the stereotyped view of the British male working class. Published in the Sun, a mass-circulation newspaper aimed at a working class audience, it offers a negative and devalued view of industrial workers, not only with their beds on the production line, but up to their eyes in all the fruits and joys of capitalism as seen through the illustrator's eyes. This is one of the recurring myths of the mass media and is part of the process of mystification which prevents many workers from understanding the value of their labour. In a situation of class struggle in which the working class had access to the mass media this cartoon might show class role reversals in which would be revealed the owners of industry lazing about on the fruits of the surplus value extracted from the so-called lazy working class.

Examples of cartoons aimed at Punch's audience which rely on ageist and racist attitudes for their humour are offered in figures 6 and 7. Figure 8, is a seaside postcard and speaks for itself. All these cartoons use humour in an insulting way, and the use of this form of negative stereotyping subtly helps to reinforce people's commonsense understanding

of what is "normal" and "real" whilst they are laughing. For a progressive political use of cartoons a useful book is The Cartoon as an Instrument of Political Education. (6) One interesting point to note is that figure 5, (which operates very much on the fantasy level) conveys most of its information visually – the caption simply reinforces the "message" – whilst the next three cartoons rely very heavily on the caption for their impact, and could in fact have been represented photographically.

We think that the cartoon medium, if used in conjunction with images from children's picture books and comics, provides a useful way of introducing the concepts of stereotyping, bias and visual coding, before leading into work on the analysis of the "realist" media of photography and film.

But the photograph never lies!
How does one show the believer in the unbiased photography that they are mistaken? We have approached the problem by listing various stages at which manipulation and bias in the production of photographs can occur:

1)   in the consciousness of the photographer, and thence in their use of the camera;
2)   in the darkroom;
3)   in the editorial process of choosing from a range of pictures;
4)   by the juxtaposition of different pictures during layout;
5)   by the addition of text;
6)   by considering the context in which it appears (i.e. is it a magazine, a political leaflet, company report, government handout, etc.?)

This last point raises a whole range of questions that need to be asked. For example is the image:

a)   for public or private consumption (i. e. to be looked at in the street, transmitted to the home, stood on the piano?);
b)   for distribution as part of the mass media or through "alternative" channels, government bodies;
c)   aimed at a particular group? (e. g. mothers, teenagers, army recruits);
d)   aimed at a particular social group or class?
e)   free, inexpensive, exclusive (i. e. how accessible is it? For example state-run baby clinics provide advertising material from large companies concerned with the "baby industry", all of which purport to give objective advice on health to parents of babies);
f)   and it is important to establish who owns the means of producing and reproducing the image (i. e. do they have a vested interest in propagating certain images and not others?)

Finally it is crucial to raise the question of the position of the beholder. What bias might they inflect, and what might be the possible responses of a person who is excluded from the group an image is explicitly directed at?

All photographers must codify "reality" in a number of ways, at both the shooting and production stages of their work. Firstly, their own class, sex, age and race are factors that are usually ignored, and yet these are crucial when one is concerned to understand more clearly the problems of viewing, selecting and evaluating a potential subject for a photograph. Such factors will influence, however unconsciously, the technical choices that have to be made for the actual taking of the picture, and the subsequent processes it undergoes in the developing and printing stages, which combine to form the biased view of the world that helps to preserve the status quo and are becoming more and more part of the learned professional practice within colleges, universities and professional institutions. The problem is that the whole set of processes involved in the production and reception of even one photograph are so complex, and the modes of stereotypical depiction have become such a "fine art" that it becomes very confusing and difficult to unravel

what is happening. Compare for example the "girl next door" image of Princess Anne in figure 9 with the "queen-like" treatment of the girl in figure 2.

Photography has also played a large part in the presentation of dominant views of history, where there is often a heavy reliance upon the "realistic" quality of the image to authenticate the text (as also there is in the presentation of news and documentary information). Examples of this can easily be seen if readers look at any collections of photographs and anthro-political data collected and presented at the beginning of this century. Many people from "alien" cultures were photographed like specimens, with cryptic and derogatory remarks accompanying their photographs, in which their cultural habits and customs were described as quaint, bizarre or even downright "evil", Photographs taken of cultural allies were posed in traditionally aesthetic ways and accompanied by adulatory texts. A particularly revealing example of this is the first edition of *Living Races of Mankind* produced by Hutchinson in the early 1900s, as an introduction to other cultures. The introduction states:

> "The most promising fields of enterprise for our ever-increasing community, the most profitable markets for our wares, may some day be found in places which are now the darkest corner of the early; and [...] the half-clothed savage, just emerging from the brute condition, is a human being capable of being educated, in the near future, into a customer for British trade."

The blatant expression of the reasons for the production of such books became muted further into this century (later editions were far les explicit), but it is helpful to remind ourselves that these attitudes underlie much of the printed matter that we see today. The passing of legislation like the Race Discrimination Act does not remove such bias; it only drives it underground, to emerge in more sophisticated and subtle forms. Similarly the recently passed Sex Discrimination Act will in no way remove the root cause of sexual oppression. Much work is being done on the subject of ideological bias; not within photographic institutions, but in the field of mass communications and cultural studies. Even so, the research being carried out on sexism, racism, ageism and class bias is very much reliant upon the work of independent groups, not always working in conjunction with each other, or having compatible aims.

Non-verbal and pre-literate communication
We feel it is vital to start visual, non-verbal and ideological education against the dominant patriarchalcapitalistic values inherent in education before children learn to read and write. Children have acquired a whole range of non-verbal and visual communicating and decoding skills long before they reach school. Such skills play a primary part in the way in which the world is experienced, interpreted and then acted upon. Our society rewards those who can master linguistic skills but ignores those with non-verbal and visual decoding abilities. Language is still taken as the major starting point for education and for the development of other skills, and is instrumental in the shaping of particular types of thinking processes. This means in effect that very different types of skills are never properly integrated, and this can encourage an uneven development in children's abilities to verbalise, think and act. Therefore, children coming from a background where language skills are encouraged most will be at a distinct advantage when it comes to observing and playing the language-based rules of the educational game and in displaying their abilities to accept and regurgitate bourgeois cultural values, whilst at the same time being "rewarded" for their performances.

In the book *A Guide to Classroom Observation* (7), teachers were documented expressing a total of 53 ways of signifying non-verbal approval and 43 of disapproval. All of these signals were comprehended by the children. (Note: body language – kinetics – should not be confused with the term "visual literacy",) It is vital that such skills be investigated and developed in younger children and used as a pre-requisite to understanding literacy. It is equally important that such skills be explored in more depth with children who are already literate. This particular book was written as a guide to better control in the classroom: how much more useful it could have been if it were also usable as a vehicle for discussion among children themselves.

Literacy

Paulo Freire, in all his writings about his work in developing Third World literacy programmes for adults (8), has emphasised the power and importance of discussion around the visual image in the pre-literate stage, as a tool for teaching literacy "for liberation", and not merely for domestication. One of his major concerns has been that teachers should understand the objectives of the society and educational system in which they work, and equally that peasants and workers should take as a starting point words which have a political relevance to their needs, e. g. words like landlord and slum could be linked to a card or slide depicting a slum area and the discussion group (the educators and learners) could then engage in discussion about the slum. After this thorough analysis the word can then be shown together with the image of the situation. Then another slide can be shown in which only the word itself appears, broken down into syllables, and these can be used as a starting point for the construction of new worlds. Freire is particularly concerned that people should learn the value of their labour and the important part it plays in transforming nature, and that their needs in society are equally valid as those of intellectuals. (9) For many people in our culture, at present involved in meaningless tasks in order to earn a living, there is no equivalent to this act of transforming nature. We need therefore to look to various working-class, feminist and black views of history, both in a visual and narrative way, for the roots of the role that their labour (industrial, agricultural and domestic) has played in the accumulation of wealth and in the shaping of consciousness. In doing so, the contradictions inherent in the present liberal teaching of history, which is a total rationalisation for past and present violence, the appropriation of the wealth, resources, land and labour of others, and various forms of cultural imperialism, will hopefully emerge. An initial contemporary model for some of this work has already been established in the work of groups like "Centerprise" in East London, with their locally based Publishing Project which makes available writings by and about local working-class people, thereby building up a gradual picture of people's own recollections and experiences of the past. They concentrate on a small geographical area(10) and encourage the use of dialect and first-person narration. As more and more writings become available, so a more varied view will emerge, as will new uses for such writings. This work is an essential first step which facilitates the examination of the contradictions which exist within the working class itself, which will help lead the way to a more coherent and dynamic picture of oppression and class consciousness – not to be found in any bourgeois history books. (11)

Our basic problem, though, is still to find an overall approach to giving children as non-mystificatory an education as possible within the constraints of the education system. Any really progressive programme should do two things:

a)   serve as a critical analytical weapon against the dominant ideology;
b)   act as a means of establishing group identity and then class-consciousness in children.

Many teachers believe this can be achieved by a critical reassessment of educational content carried out by the building of more internally democratic and creative teaching structures which will serve to invalidate the old form. Photography is an ideal tool to help serve these aims, and with which to help combat the dominant values, in that (in spite of its obvious limitations) its potential uses as a critical and recording tool (some of which are described later in this article) have not yet been institutionally formalised or realised.

Notes

1   This text was originally published in *Screen Education* 21 / Winter 1976 – 1977.

2   These were the titles of the national public examinations taken by school students at the ages of 16 and 18, respectively, at the time the article was written.

3   See *Screen Education* 15 / Summer 1975.

4   See *The Feminist Writers Workshop*, Vol. 1 of *The Feminist English Dictionary: An Intelligent Woman's Guide to Dirty Words*, Loop Centre YMCA, and *10 Quick Ways to Analyse Children's Books for Racism and Sexism,* The Council of Interracial Books for Children: New York, s.d.

5   Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice.* Doubleday: Garden City, N.Y. 1958 (first edition: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.: Cambridge, Mass., 1954).

6   Institute of Cultural Action, *The Cartoon as an Instrument of Political Education*, IDAC Document 1, Geneva, s. d.

7   Rob Walter, Clem Adelman and Janine Wiedel, *A Guide to Classroom Observation*, Methuen: London 1975.

8   See in particular Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom, and Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin: Harmondsworth 1972.

9   Carol and Lars Berggren, *The Literary Process: A Practice in Domestication or Liberation*, Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative: London 1975.

10   *Working Lives*, Vol. 1, 1905 – 1945. A People's Autobiography of Hackney*, Hackney WEA with Centreprise Publishing Project, 1975.

11   At a more academic and organised level there is also a major group of socialist historians whose work is available through annual and occasional workshops, pamphlets and in their new twice-yearly publication *History Workshop - A Journal of Socialist Historians.*

Jo Spence. Beyond the Perfect Image. Photography, Subjectivity, Antagonism, MACBA Exhibition catalogue, (Barcelona: MACBA, 2005), p172. Jo Spence: Work (Part I). Â 7 From: Polysnappers, degree show introduction text, 1982 (published in Jo Spence. Beyond the Perfect Image. Photography, Subjectivity, Antagonism, MACBA Exhibition catalogue), p22. 198082. Jo spence: work (part II). 12 JUNE11 AUGUST 2012 STUDIO VOLTAIRE 198286 The Picture of Health? Jo Spence / Terry Dennett, 198286, The Picture of Health? Last Christmas, having recently completed three years study as a mature student, having earned a first-class degree with honours, now utterly exhausted and wondering what the hell it had all been about, I had to go into hospital. Suddenly. Jo Spence was the iconoclastic feminist photographer who turned her cancer diagnosis into a mirror for reflection.Â Her life story is epic â€" outlined in detail in her 1986 autobiography Putting Myself in the Picture â€" and her images intimate, diarist, honest, confronting and, more often than not, uncomfortable. Yet for Spence, this often grotesque documentation was a necessary journey in reclaiming her body from the illness. Learn more. See all 2 images. Jo Spence Beyond the Perfect Image. Photography, Subjectivity, Antagonism Paperback â€" 1 Jan 2005. by Spence (Author), Jo (Author), Ribalta (Author), Jorge (Author), Dennet (Author), Terry (Author), Wilson (Author), Siona (Author), Roberts (Author), John (Author), Zita Grover (Author), Jan (Author) & 9 more.Â Page 1 of 1 Start overPage 1 of 1. This shopping feature will continue to load items. In order to navigate out of this carousel please use your heading shortcut key to navigate to the next or previous heading. Back. Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression (Comedia). Jo Spence. 5.0 out of 5 stars 1. Paperback. Jo Spence: Putting Myself in the Picture: a Political, Personal and Photographic Autobiography. Frances Borzello, editor. Camden Press. 1986. ISBN 0-948491-14-0. Jo Stanley (Ed.), Jo Spence: Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression, (London: Routledge, 1995). ISBN 0-415-08883-6. Graham Clarke, The Photograph.Â Jo Spence. Beyond the Perfect Image. Photography, Subjectivity, Antagonism, MACBA Exhibition catalogue, (Barcelona: MACBA, 2005). Jo Spence and Joan Soloman (Ed.), What Can a Woman Do with a Camera?