POLITICS IN PHOTOGRAPHY

From its earliest aspects, the representation of reality has been one of the attributes of power: a quarry animal painted on a cave wall, the figure of a deity fashioned in stone, the mask of a tribe's totemic beast are all aspects of power and control. Increasingly complex forms of representation called for ever more specialised skills - skills which in turn required long, expensive training and the maintenance of specialist workers out of a society's economic surplus. Inevitably, artists, like other purveyors of luxury goods, became dependent on the patronage of those with the power to dispose of that surplus. At the same time, given that the untimely depiction of a deposed emperor or the inclusion of the wrong set of attributes with a saint's image could have serious, possibly fatal, consequences, the subject matter and even the form and style of representation necessarily became subject to political control.

The fact that representation is as much a part of the discourse of politics as it is of the arts becomes obvious once we appreciate the characteristically functionalist attitude of authority. That of the medieval church, for instance, was succinctly stated by the Franciscan monk St.Bonaventure towards the middle of the 13th century: "[images] were made for the simplicity of the ignorant, so that the uneducated who are unable to read scripture can, through statues and paintings, read about the sacraments of our faith; they were introduced because of the sluggishness of the affections... for our emotion is aroused more by what is seen than by what is heard; they were introduced on account of the transitory nature of memory, because those things which are only heard fall into oblivion more easily than those which are seen." Art for art's sake would have made little or no sense to a Medici.

Until the threshold of the modern era, control over visual representation remained in the hands of the ruling classes; as such, its political program, whether overt or covert, could not but support the interests of those classes. One of the earliest functions of easel painting was to celebrate the glory and individuality of rulers; dynasties might come and go, but regnal portraits continue in an unbroken chain across the centuries. The state commemorated itself in struggle and triumph, while cities and city-states celebrated their power and wealth. The Christian church, particularly in a pre-literate age, used visual representation as the most splendid of sermons. In the West, respected members of the establishment enthusiastically depicted their position and influence, their hold on the land, their material wealth. Other pleasures, too, could be depicted for fortunate patrons of the arts, from the erudite melancholy of neoclassical landscape to a prurience sanctioned by classical or biblical references.

Another important characteristic of pre-photographic representation is its relative resistance to change. Inevitably, the reading of a work changes from culture to culture and from generation to generation, but these changes are usually a matter of nuance and degree. For instance, when we look at Duccio's *Maesta* most of us are unlikely share the original seventeenth-century Siennese audience's explicit adoration, but we know we are looking

at religious art, and may still experience a sense of the numinous. By the same token, while few contemporary Britons are likely to share the uncritical enthusiasm of their nineteenth-century fellow-countrymen for Admiral Nelson, the rhetoric of his many ceremonial portraits is still immediately apparent.

It would seem that at least two conclusions can be drawn about the politics of pre-photographic visual representation: the first, that it is overwhelmingly conservative in purpose and intention, and the second, that its meaning and content are largely impervious to changes in context. Under the circumstances, it may not be excessive to see the arrival on the scene of photographic representation as above all a political and specifically radical event.

With the invention of photography, and particularly with its increasing democratisation thanks to lighter, cheaper and ever less complex equipment, a practical and effective means of visual representation became available to a wide public; for the first time, representation was at the service not merely of the establishment, but also of its opponents. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that while the mass distribution of photographs can to a large extend be controlled through censorship, totalitarian regimes have rarely, if ever, succeeded in imposing a blanket ban the use of photographic materials; to my knowledge, the only serious and sustained effort was made by the Axis powers in occupied Europe. Even though that attempt was backed by complete control over the means of production, it was never entirely successful.

Photography, however, utterly promiscuous in the range of meanings it attracts to itself, is characterised above all by a stubborn, often profoundly irritating fluidity: unlike paintings, photographs shift meaning constantly, changing to accommodate different contexts, captions, environments or presuppositions. This can make the political use or reading of a photograph peculiarly unreliable. John Hilliard gave an elegant demonstration of this problem in *Cause of Death*, which presents four images of a shrouded body cropped from the same print; depending on the caption and particular cropping chosen, the cause of death suggested might be "Crushed", "Drowned", "Burned" or "Fell".

Benjamin's famous comment, that a photograph of the Krupp factory reveals nothing about that institution, encapsulates the problems facing a radical or politicised photographer, but there is actually a worse danger lying in wait: the possibility that the same image may be susceptible to a use entirely opposite from that intended. Manuel Alvarez Bravo's photograph *Obrero en huelga asesinado* ("Striking Worker, Murdered") shows a young man, almost certainly working class, lying on the ground with a pool of blood gathered under his head; the quantity of blood, as well as something glaucous about the eyes, make it fairly clear that he is dead, and that he died as a result of violence. Though it has, understandably, become a classic of left-wing imagery, its effectiveness is partly a function of the title; imagine it accompanied by the caption "Mass murderer shot after killing fifteen in school bloodbath", and the point is made obvious.

Of course, despite their fluidity, photographs are as vulnerable to exhaustion as any other visual medium - more so, perhaps, given the seemingly ceaseless flood of photographic images we are deluged by daily. This is another source of anguish to purveyors of traditional political imagery, since, compelled as they are to address the widest possible audience, they must necessarily adopt the most direct visual vocabulary available; inevitably, such images rapidly degenerate into cliche, draining them of meaning and defeating their very purpose.

Max Kozloff has remarked that "when we are intended to understand a riot victim as martyr, a young child as an adorable pet, an armed soldier as an oppressive force, an old man as an incarnation of wisdom, we find ourselves in the one-dimensional world of ready-made judgements. As soon as the photographer determines that social types and their expected roles come together, then my ideological tendency is assumed ahead of time, and I can make no emotional or political discovery by means of the photograph." In effect, Kozloff is here underlining the difference between propaganda and what has been called 'committed' photography; in the first case, the viewer's ideological tendency is taken for granted, while in the second a considerable amount of skill and effort is devoted to convincing a less partisan audience.

It may also happen that ideological presuppositions will act as blinkers on the photographer, blinding him to the possibility that a neutral observer may give another, perhaps more hostile reading to his images; in some cases, this alternative reading may even fly in the face of the proffered caption. In a collection of images documenting resistance and civil war in the mountains of Epirus between 1940 and 1949, the Greek photographer Kostas Balafas included two fascinating photographs, taken within minutes of each other and printed on facing pages. The first shows two communist military commanders riding black horses through the streets of a country town; the other shows the faces of a small crowd watching the guerillas ride past. The caption under the second image reads "The people watch them admiringly", but even the most superficial examination shows that if any emotion is gripping this remarkably reserved crowd, it is simple fear. Balafas' sympathies (he was part of the parading detachment) appear, in this case, to have addled his critical faculties, letting through an image which cooler judgement might have suppressed.

In fact, Balafas could probably take it for granted that his target audience, sharing as it did his political views, would follow the same uncritical reading; we all tend to be consumers of media which, with greater or lesser sophistication, mirror our own beliefs and prejudices. In the case of photographs, acceptance is further facilitated by the common habit of assuming that, unless there is hard evidence to the contrary, all representational photographs tell the truth; the old saw that "photographs never lie" is deeply ingrained in most consumers of photography. The more sophisticated may reject the premise intellectually, but a conscious effort must usually be exerted to that effect. Recent advances in digital manipulation might have shaken photography's claim to truth, but old beliefs die hard.

This predisposition is of considerable assistance to photography in its most familiar political incarnations - reportage, photojournalism and documentary. Dedicated and politicised news photographers have, at times, produced and disseminated images which, however slowly or indirectly, eventually helped change public perceptions; one need only mention in passing the work of FSA photographers during the Great Depression in America, as well as that of Philip Jones Griffiths in Viet Nam, Don McCullin in Biafra, and Susan Meiselas in Nicaragua. Their success can be gauged by the fact that photographic coverage of two later conflicts, the Falklands and Gulf wars, was subject to restrictions reminiscent of World War I.

The sympathetic or committed coverage of conflicts, disasters and spectacular deprivation are the most dramatic use of photography in a political context, but scarcely the only one. Indeed, some radical critics have argued that *all* photography is essentially political; few have done so more insistently than Terry Dennett and Jo Spence: "We believe that photographers are already in politics. This is because the images we make carry ideological messages which, cumulatively, help to shape people's ideas, values and attitudes. If we are shown enough pictures of women's bodies, or packets of Daz, then we could probably conclude that society has a value for such imagery... In this respect, photographers cannot be anything but political".

While the point made by Dennett and Spence is superficially intriguing, it is far too sweeping to be of much practical use. Its political weakness has been comprehensively exposed by Frank Webster: "The new photography does have a point in terming the production of political images a political act. But it achieves this by adopting a wide and grand notion of the political which has a rather paradoxical consequence. The new photography hoists photography into the sphere of politics only by reducing the whole range to a common denominator... Everything by this token becomes of political moment."

Webster's critique of Spence and Dennett is telling for both political and aesthetic reasons. Politically, this is partly because their approach introduces the dangers of sectarianism, and partly because it also trivialises analysis; after all, if everything is deeply and uniformly permeated with political significance, then perhaps none of it is of any real importance. On the aesthetic front, he points out that "photography, having been raised into the political sphere by a factor which can accommodate anything as political, is then expected to become sectarian..."; the second is that "[it] may well be correct to identify a political dimension in even the most 'artistic' photography, But, and here is the rub, in regarding even the most 'aesthetic' images as propagandistic, the new photography becomes insensitive to an important principle. This is... that while all art may be propaganda, not all propaganda is art". Both these consequences, Webster argues, lead inevitably to a Stalinist view of the arts.

This may be unnecessarily apocalyptic, though I share Webster's unease at the subordination of all photographic activity to sectarian considerations. Nevertheless, I believe that there can be no doubt that many facets of

photography automatically include a socio-political agenda, and such an agenda is undoubtedly most evident in advertising (the source of both examples in the Dennett-Spence quotation above). It is certainly also the case that much of the apparently 'innocent' photography used in the mass media is loaded with ideological presuppositions. However, the 'message' to be found in most representational and documentary photography is not active, in the sense of "shaping... ideas, values and attitudes", but passive. By this I mean that while a photograph may not necessarily carry a political message, it is almost certainly overflowing with class signifiers. This obvious but frequently overlooked characteristic has been correctly identified by Kozloff: "Dripping with details of expression, dress, body language, and setting, photographs continually point out life-styles and income levels which, in turn, indicate something very concrete about class identity".

Class signifiers such as these, when found lurking in the average photograph, are a useful tool of political analysis; however, there is an entire school of photographic documentary which deliberately sets out to pin down and record elements of class difference, whether in individuals or their environment. A classic example is August Sander's great portrait project *Man of the 20th Century*. A single image from this monumental series, "Young farmers on their way to a dance, Westerwald 1914" inspired John Berger to write one of his most brilliant essays, in which he discusses, over ten pages, the political significance of the young men's black suits. "Villagers... were persuaded to choose suits. By publicity. By pictures. By the new mass media.... The working classes... came to accept as their own certain standards of the class that ruled over them - in this case standards of chic and sartorial worthiness. At the same time their very acceptance of these standards, their very conforming to these norms which had nothing to do with either their own inheritance or their daily experience, condemned them, within the system of those standards, to being always, and recognisably to the classes above them, second-rate, clumsy, uncouth, defensive. That is indeed to succumb to a cultural hegemony".

A problem with this approach in lesser hands than Sander's is that it tends to degenerate into a search for grotesquerie. In this context, Martin Parr's work has been seen as some of the most aggressive social documentary work to come out of Britain in recent years. This seems to apply with particular force to his latest project, a book published in collaboration with Nicholas Barker, producer of a BBC television series on "personal taste in the British home" under the title *Signs of the Times*. This area of class signifiers, a minefield anywhere, is particularly fraught in contemporary Britain, for as Barker points out, "...where you find rapid social mobility you find a corresponding increase in anxiety about personal taste. The Thatcher years may have given the public new opportunities to define themselves through patterns of consumption rather than their social and educational background. However the flipside of this privilege was the vastly increased scope for getting it wrong."

Parr's aspirants to the upper-middle classes seem fuelled largely by consumerism, and if there is one area of photography which certainly includes an extensive hidden agenda, it is advertising photography. This

aspect of photographic representation probably absorbs more money, energy and even talent than all the rest put together; art is not even in the same league. Because of the power advertising photography has over the lives of so many people, the subversion of advertising is an area apparently rife with possibilities for the politicised photographer.

In the early to mid-seventies Victor Burgin produced a number of works which appropriated the style and rhetoric of advertising to produce a message theoretically at odds with the aspirations of that medium. 500 copies of *Possession* were posted in the centre of Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the summer of 1976; the text read, under the image of a couple embracing:

> WHAT DOES POSSESSION MEAN TO YOU?
> 7% OF OUR POPULATION OWN 84% OF OUR WEALTH

Unfortunately, a survey by *Studio International* magazine revealed that the message of *Possession* had been understood by only one out of seven viewers. To his credit, Burgin recognised the problem in an interview four years later: "But, yes, I did it once and that was it. I did it very largely to show what might be done in that direction, 'to encourage others'. I wouldn't personally do it again... that was an intervention in the area of advertising, and advertising is not the institution in which I am organically rooted. I could only intervene in that area with great difficulty - there was no way I could sustain a continuing effort there."

Hans Haacke is an artist who has consistently worked at subverting not only advertising rhetoric, but also the hidden actions behind the benign public persona which many public corporations work so hard at cultivating. One of his favourite targets has been the Mobil petroleum company, whose record of extreme right-wing political involvement he attacks in photo/text pieces such as *You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet!*. That Haacke's work is regarded as more than just a flea-bite was shown in September 1984, when Mobil threatened legal action against the Tate Gallery over the publication of a Haacke catalogue which included work critical of the company.

It is worth remarking, however, on the fact that the work of Haacke and Burgin is usually to be found exhibited in the kind of gallery, and most frequently bought by the kind of people, who between them exemplify precisely the class enemies the work is warning against. This raises the awkward question of the co-option of art - not, as it happens, a recent phenomenon. Jacques-Louis David was perhaps the first professional radical artist in history, and his *Death of Marat* of 1793 is still one of the great icons of the French revolution. Barely eleven years later, the man who had been the revolution's devoted artistic commissar painted the *Coronation of Napoleon* — more than ten metres of uncritical, reactionary adulation. Whole-hearted collaboration in the style of David, while not unknown, remains comparatively unusual. What is more common, and much more insidious, is the ability of the capitalist market economy to absorb and co-opt literally anything which bears the label of art; it is hard to think of any artistic movement which, having acquired the slightest head of steam, no matter

how deliberately offensive, uncommercial, inane or outspoken, has not ended up in one museum or another.

Nor is the phenomenon limited to the world of art; commerce, and particularly advertising, show the same amazing ability to digest anything. Don McCullin has produced some of the most harrowing images of conflict and deprivation this century, but by the eighties the falling demand in Britain for hard photojournalism, combined with a Thatcherite fixation on consumer journalism by such once-vital newspapers as the London *Sunday Times* left McCullin with few outlets for this kind of work. To his astonishment, "I found the readiest projects from the enemy that had driven me out of journalism - advertising itself. The pay was quite startling. I could earn in one day more than I earned in two months running across battlefields for the *Sunday Times*. They wanted me there because, bizarrely, while reality was fleeing from newspapers, it was creeping back into ads. They call it pseudo-realism. It is the surface style, not the essence they are after. They order a touch of realism just as they order a touch of nostalgia; just as post-modern architecture uses a touch of classical porch." Of course the idea of an art director pleading for "something along the lines of your starving Biafran baby, Don" sounds like a profoundly tasteless joke - or at least, it did before Beneton decided to change its public profile.

The use (or attempted use) by the clothing manufacturer of Therese Frare's photograph showing American AIDS campaigner David Kirby on his deathbed is already part of the sociology of photography. The proposal generated such controversy, including virtually unanimous opposition from organisations on the front line of the struggle against AIDS, that the projected poster campaign had to be suspended. However, a Beneton executive quoted in the London *Independent* let the cat out of the bag when he confided that "publicly, the company will say it is surprised everyone is shocked by its campaign... but privately, the intention is to generate such shock".

Another form of co-option exerted by the establishment on photography in general, and would-be radical photography in particular, is, very simply, exposure to the oldest aphrodisiac of all: power. The left may, as they say, have all the best songs, but the establishment is richer, sexier and fully aware of the fact that preaching doesn't sell. The editorial photographer Annie Leibowitz first came to prominence for her political reportage in *Rolling Stone*. The kind of work she is now identified with is exemplified by "Hall of Fame", an extended picture spread in the December 1991 issue of the magazine*Vanity Fair* which consists of full-page colour portraits of assorted heroes of the Gulf War. Given the full Leibowitz treatment are General Norman Schwarzkopf, the Kuwaiti Ambassador to Washington, a woman police officer from Utah pictured hefting a Remington shotgun who is described as a "U.S. troops pinup", and an F117-A Stealth bomber. Rarely has American triumphalism been celebrated in colours so lush, in images so completely free of any doubt. To compare Leibowitz with David would be ridiculous - and yet, its hard not to see these images as a late 20th-century version of *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*. Only, of course, sexier.

If power relationships are a major factor governing photographic representation, that of non-western countries and cultures is, not surprisingly, peculiarly vulnerable to distortion. Such subjects are, almost by definition, depicted by and on behalf of first world media, for whom the third world provides a frisson of exoticism. That the traffic should be almost exclusively one-way is understandable; after all, a Somali peasant struggling to survive is unlikely to display a keen interest in the antics of colourful natives in Pittsburgh or Barcelona. The result is that virtually all representations of alien cultures likely to come our way are, by definition, slanted.

Take, for example, that modern classic of 'exotic' photography, Irving Penn's *Worlds in a Small Room*, for which Penn travelled from the Himalayas to New Guinea taking formal portraits of selected natives. In the introduction to his book, published in 1974, Penn wrote that "taking people away from their natural circumstances and putting them into the studio in front of a camera did not simply isolate them, it transformed them. Sometimes the change was subtle; sometimes it was great enough to be almost shocking. But always there was transformation. As they crossed the threshold of the studio, they left behind some of the manners of their community, taking on a seriousness of self-presentation that would not have been expected of simple people".

There is an arrogance and insensitivity to that statement, even to the use of such terms as "simple people", which is perhaps more apparent today than it was nearly two decades ago when these words were written, and the entire project now feels oddly uncomfortable, even graceless. The problem lies in the fact that Penn's enterprise, with its levelling approach to radically different cultures, and its application of high-fashion aesthetics to these cultures, exposes the unequal power relationships between photographer and subjects rather more clearly than had been intended. Not that I suggest for a moment that Penn was personally anything other than kind and courteous to his subjects; consider, however, the extreme stylistic similarity between his photographs and those of the French photographer Marc Garanger. Both depict North African peasant or tribal women in exotic finery posed again plain backgrounds, staring directly at the camera.

This, however, is Garanger's account of how he came to take his photos in 1960 in the mountains of Algeria; at the time, the photographer was a French army conscript, and the photographs were to be used for identity cards in a new anti-terrorist campaign. "When I arrived for the sittings, there would be a detachment of armed men with machine guns across their shoulders, an interpreter and the commander. The women would be lined up. Each in turn would sit on a stool outdoors, in front of the white wall of the house - the mechta. I would come to within three feet of them. They would be unveiled. In a period of ten days, I made two thousand portraits, two hundred a day, mostly of women. They were from fourteen years old to no age. They had no choice in the matter. Their only way of protesting was though their look".

It is worth emphasising that these women were muslim, and that other than their sons, husbands and fathers, no male would have seen them unveiled

since childhood; a forced public unveiling would have had a psychological effect not far short of rape. And as Carole Naggar points out, to the shame of unveiling should be added a second one, almost as strong, that of being photographed. Garanger had no choice in the matter; as a conscript, he would have suffered severe penalties for refusing a direct order in the field. I admit to wondering, however, about his decision to publish these images in 1982. If they were unacceptable in 1960, were they any less so twenty years on?

Clearly, it is far from the case that all photographic representations of other cultures are made with pernicious intent. Sebastiao Salgado's classic images of famine victims in the Sahel were taken during 1984-85 at the bequest of the aid organisation Médecins sans Frontières - as impeccable a commission as one could wish for. His photos are both brilliant in execution and absolutely harrowing in content; perhaps the most memorable is the one which depicts a woman and six children setting off across an utterly featureless tract of desert, carrying nothing but a single, half-empty flask. The problem is that even here, with the best intentions in the world, we cannot avoid reading the image other than through a veil of aesthetised exoticism; Salgado's subject is one of unrelieved horror, but for us, its representation all too quickly shifts meaning and context. Appalled, we watch ourselves inexorably consigning the photo to one (or both) of two familiar categories - that of the third world atrocity document, whose subtext is that nothing will ever change, and that of art history, which busily starts looking for significant echoes in western art.

If the dominant culture inevitably and invariably distorts the representation of other countries, it does not always brings to the task the skills of a Salgado. A hilarious and simultaneously appalling example was published in a recent issue of *Vogue*, which chose to send a photographer, model, wardrobe assistant, hairdresser and art director to play at being African herders. The tackiness, the sheer grotesquerie of the enterprise does not appear to have impinged on any of the participants' consciousness, least of all on that of the photographer, Arthur Elgort. For the record, the outfit worn by the model in one of the images was produced by the houses of Versace, Taroni and Hermés, and was valued at a total of £898.00 as of December 1991, excluding the assegai. Nobody seems to have taken credit for the outfits of the two Masai children running alongside, though to a reasonably unprejudiced eye these appear both more practical and considerably more elegant than the Versace confection.

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