

renewal

welcome to the party

citizenship and visual communication

These notes began as an informal discussion with Neal Lawson about the difficulties of making the ethical, or moral benefit, of public provision evident. My interest in visual culture and the history of visual propaganda (or visual projection) in politics has given me a slightly different perspective to that of political scientists when faced with this problem. I am grateful to Neal Lawson for his invitation to explore this problem at greater length.

The traditional relationships between pictures and politics are in a state of upheaval. The controlling mechanisms of colour-me-beautiful and photo-opportunity management are losing their grip and a new visual economy based on hand-held digital media is emerging. In consequence, and inevitably, the vocabulary of politics will be increasingly visual. This transition phase is bound to offer many opportunities and challenges. Making the ethical benefit of public provision visible is just one of the challenges.

Two examples from the recent election campaign illustrate the point. Think of how Labour imagined that no one would notice the rent-a-crowd family in the background of its poster launch photo-opportunity; think also of the hapless attempt by the Conservative candidate, Ed Matts, in Dorset to alter the visual material supporting his candidacy. All this is in sharp contrast to the population at large, especially the young, who are now increasingly familiar, and comfortable, with an image culture based on portable digital technology. The muddled visual

projection of political ideas is evidence of a “digital divide” opening up between the political class and the real world.¹

We should remember, however, that the technologies that support the development of this portable, instant and digital visual language are relatively recent. The dislocation between people and politics, often misrepresented as political apathy, is perhaps, in part, a consequence of the powerful visual technologies on offer today. It is surprising, therefore, that the idea of visual literacy as a powerful aide to political activism is under-recognised. This is, of course, of substantially greater significance to the left with its concern for the effective projection of social democratic ambitions as progressive and idealistic.

The difficulties of successfully projecting the ideals of progressive politics through visual culture should not be underestimated. The control of market forces shapes our contemporary visual culture at every level.² Anyone who doubts the effectiveness of the controlling mechanism of the market should refer to Galbraith and Chomsky who between them, and in little more than 100 pages combined, reveal the “innocent frauds” of market capitalism and the destructive grip of the military-industrial complex.³

Galbraith’s arguments also apply against the market rhetoric and vocabulary used to describe the problems of efficiency, productivity and cost when applied to public provision. The arguments effectively disabuse the Right’s mythologies of economy and efficiency by revealing them to be necessarily linked to limited provision. The vocabulary of contemporary market capitalism is therefore, along with its politics, irreconcilable to meritocracy. It is not surprising, in these

¹ Johnson (2005) describes this digital divide (the ability and skill to make use of digital information) as having important consequences for our understanding of intelligence and reasoning in contemporary society.

² Nowhere is this more evident than in the contemporary environment of large supermarkets where their aggressive pricing is matched by equally aggressive signage, information and point-of-sale design. The creation of aggressive and aggravating anxieties is characteristic of contemporary environments of mass-market consumption.

³ Galbraith (2004) and Chomsky (2004) have both been published in the *Pocket Penguin* series to mark the 70th birthday of Penguin Books.

circumstances, that this linguistic incompatibility makes the positive description of public provision so difficult. This is especially so when the Fourth Estate has been reduced, by capital, to a position where its primary function is the endorsement of the market forces through the rhetoric of fear and greed.⁴

The digitalisation of contemporary visual culture takes the manipulation and distribution of images beyond the established controlling mechanisms (described as political economy) of the establishment class and returns some power to ordinary people.⁵ Accordingly, the conjuncture of technology and design has important consequences for politics, identity and citizenship. In the circumstances it is worth looking at how similar conjunctures have played themselves out during the 1940s and 1960s. In order to understand this recurring social phenomenon we will require tools and ideas drawn from semiotics, visualisation and political economy.⁶

The radical and emancipatory potential of technology and cultural production was first itemised by Walter Benjamin in 1934 and 1936.⁷ Benjamin's criteria for the development of a properly modernist and progressive form of cultural production are listed as mass or mechanical reproduction, wide distribution and economy. Benjamin was writing in the context of a German and soviet struggle against fascism and specifically about literary forms of production. Much has been written of the emergence, during the 1930s, of a mass visual culture based on photography, film and process block.⁸

⁴ Berger (1972) pp129-154 describes the visual language of publicity.

⁵ The changed relationship between quality and quantity implicit in this observation remains problematic. Traditionally, increases in the quantity of cultural production have been described by reference to diminished standards.

⁶ The study of visual culture draws heavily on wide range of critical sources.

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols as a structured language. For the purposes of this essay it is sufficient to draw the readers attention to a general student introduction such as Cobley and Jansz (1999).

Theories of visualisation explore the construction of identity by reference to images (Anderson (1983) and Ryan (1997)), technologies of representation (Crary (1992) and psychoanalytical considerations of subjectivity.

The political economy of visual culture would describe that visual culture in relation to the technical, managerial and economic determinants of its production, distribution and consumption. What is described is effectively the means by which supply and demand are balanced, through pricing mechanisms, in favour of the status quo.

⁷ Benjamin (1934) & (1936) provide the founding texts of any political analysis of cultural production.

⁸ See for example Aynsley (2000) for an explanation of *typo-photo* and modernist design practice.

In Britain, the emergence of cinema as a mass entertainment, during the 1920s and 30s, was recognised by Stephen Tallents as a potentially progressive force. Tallents described the potential of a documentary film movement in terms of a “projection of Britain” that might, eventually, contribute to the recasting of imperial relations.⁹

In Britain the radical potential of a mass visual culture remained constrained by conservative forces within the establishment and by a political economy in the print media based on craft traditions dating back to the 19th century. The advent of WW2 forced the pace of technological change within the print media. It was understood that the propaganda requirements of total war could only be met by a modernised print industry based on the greatly expanded capacity of mechanical reproduction. Paradoxically, the expansion of print media was only possible because of an influx of “outsider” technicians from beyond the traditional establishment forcing grounds of public school and Oxbridge (Central Europe and the provinces). In consequence, the traditional controlling mechanisms of the establishment, being chiefly money and capacity, were crucially loosened.

The illustrated photographic weekly *Picture Post*, launched in 1938, quickly became a platform for progressive political and social ideas. Stuart Hall, writing in 1972, recognised the magazine as a departure from traditional British newspaper journalism and as a manifestation of the nascent social-democratic movement in Britain. Hall described a series of pictorial and editorial conventions that distinguished *Picture Post* and identified the resulting pictorial discourse with the development of a “social eye.”¹⁰

⁹ Tallents (1932) may be credited with providing an important support, through his posts at the Empire Marketing Board and at the GPO, to the development of the British documentary film movement. The projection of community is especially evident in the wartime work of Humphrey Jennings. Tallents deserves to be better known.

¹⁰ Hall(1972) provides one of the earliest critical studies of visual culture in the age of mass media.

In terms of graphic design there were many opportunities, during the course of WW2, to project messages that were simultaneously patriotic and progressive. The industrial safety posters produced by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, and underwritten for the duration by Ernest Bevin as Minister of Labour, helped reduce accidents and to foster a new climate of worker welfare within the industrial workplace. The discussion notes and visual materials of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs were produced, first and foremost, as motivational material for the troops. They quickly assumed a secondary function as radicalising and political consciousness raising propaganda. In the propaganda posters designed by Abram Games military discipline and social justice are always aligned.¹¹ After the war, the Central Office of Information produced a steady stream of public sector propaganda aimed at familiarising the population with the rights and obligations of public provision. It is worth noting that the COI survives only in modified form. Furthermore, it should be noted that a combination of market forces, planning restrictions and architectural minimalism have all conspired to make the display of political propaganda more difficult.¹²

It is worth commenting on RoSPA's industrial safety campaign during WW2. The campaign was a response to the realisation that production, resources and safety were connected. The influx of neophyte workers into industrial and workshop spaces was an integral part of the productive effort of total war. The issue of industrial safety became apparent when it was realised that people who had injured themselves in the blackout or workplace were using facilities made ready for the victims of enemy action. The production of posters and visual propaganda associated with the campaign became part of Ernest Bevin's longer term welfare

¹¹ Games (2003) provides a comprehensive account of this important designer's work. See p66 for his ABCA posters.

¹² It is interesting to consider the impact of good taste (whether modernist or heritage based) on the display of political propaganda. The control of display space by the advertising industry has been a very effective form of political control. More recently, heritage and aesthetic considerations have combined to criminalise flyposting activities. The doctrinaire minimalism of lottery funded architectural projects has further diminished the opportunities for the acceptable display of political propaganda.

agenda aimed at securing lasting gains in the working conditions of industrial workers.

The posters produced by RoSPA for this campaign are little known today. The posters were produced using the latest photo-mechanical and offset process of lithography. The designs make use of visual symbolism drawn from surrealism and the nascent visual language of the international Left. For example, a visual connection is implicitly made between the glasses of Eisenstein's nurse in "Potemkin" and the safety goggles promoted by RoSPA.¹³ The emergence of a sophisticated visual language, able to draw on a wide range of international and artistic symbolism, along with a modernist semiotics of worker emancipation is surprising within the context of war and confounds the orthodoxies of a British resistance to modernism.¹⁴

The impact of the RoSPA campaign was not simply evident in the improved industrial safety of war production. It manifest itself in a changed perception, amongst the workers themselves, of their own status. The transformations in the visualisation of ordinary people during WW2 were a crucial element in establishing the status of the experience of the war as radical and emancipatory. The safety posters therefore played a modest role in recasting the traditional rights and responsibilities attaching themselves to both labour and capital in the workplace. The projection of a moral benefit was attached to the experience and quality of work in a safe and humane environment as a distinctive and defining element in British, as opposed to American, Soviet or German, citizenship. Without the successful projection of these ideals during WW2 the form of post-war political reform and policy would have been very different.¹⁵

¹³ The broken glasses provide the visual climax of the Odessa steps sequence in Eisenstein's film "Battleship Potemkin" from 1927. The film was an international success and was widely screened throughout Britain. The image was clearly considered to have sufficient common currency to be used in a different context.

¹⁴ Rennie (2005) has examined the RoSPA campaign in detail.

¹⁵ The development, during the 1940s, of a visual language able to communicate the moral benefits of welfare, citizenship and public provision is the theme of continuing research, by the author, at the London College of Communication.

The visual projection of these ideals was made possible by the widespread and rapid emergence of new technologies of mass media to support the propaganda efforts of the Home Front. The mobilisation of these new technologies transformed the cosy political economy of the media in Britain (characterised by a balance of supply, demand and capital in favour of the status quo) and took images and their meanings beyond the controlling mechanisms of the Establishment class.

The emergence of this radicalised graphic design was greatly helped by the collapse, during the war and for a period after it, of the most powerful controlling mechanism of all – the market. George Orwell, writing to *The Partisan Review* in 1941, noted that the collapse of advertising revenues within the war economy had strengthened the independence of the editorial departments relative to their colleagues in advertising and marketing. In consequence, they were less circumscribed in their efforts to imagine a different future.¹⁶

During the 1960s the liberal social values of “swinging London” were projected way beyond their immediate environments through the effective use of new media. The liberating potential of new media became a characteristic of the 1960s. The craft of silk-screen printing was, for example, revolutionised by the development of light-sensitive plastic films. The process became much speedier and, in consequence, less expensive. The silk-screen process became a means by which the counter-cultural movements of the late 1960s could produce short run posters and communications at a local level. It is worth recalling that the Paris protests of May 1968 were given their most lasting visual expression by the silk-screen posters of *l’Atelier Populaire*. In Britain, the political possibilities of the

¹⁶ Orwell (1941) described the political opportunities made possible by the circumstances of war and national survival. Orwell’s writing gave a huge impetus to the political consciousness raising effects of the experience of WW2 for ordinary people. Orwell’s essays and journalism gave him a platform, made possible by the circumstances of war, for polemical writing.

countercultural movement were played out as hedonistic and more liberalised lifestyle choices.¹⁷

Writing in 1965, John Berger (a pioneer critic at the *New Statesman* and, later, author of the massively influential *Ways of Seeing*) decried the fact that *the possibility of new relations between words and images is seldom pursued on a constructive public scale. No editor yet thinks of a photographic library as a possible vocabulary... Few writers yet think of using pictures to make their argument.*¹⁸

At the time of his writing Berger's visual culture was controlled by a small number of professionals working in London (perhaps a few hundred at most). The growth of amateur photography and of the empowering technologies of digital media have transformed our pictorial environment so that it has now, more or less, devolved into the hands of millions of internet users. The political consequences of this are profound and inevitable.

The relentless advance of consumer capitalism over the last fifty years has, amongst other things, recast these narratives of emancipation around the notion of lifestyle choice. These choices are ruthlessly projected through a highly developed range of advertising images. The resulting visualisations are, within contemporary consumer culture, made up of an atomised variant of consumption where we have become defined, as individuals, by what we consume. It is hardly surprising, in these circumstances, that when the political establishment have attempted to project beyond the Westminster village they have been ensnared by the brand rhetoric of contemporary marketing.

¹⁷ These counter-cultural lifestyle choices are evident in, for example, the visual style and subject matter of "Oz magazine." By the early 1980s the technical details of small-run publishing were widely available. See Trewick and Zeitlyn (1983).

¹⁸ Berger, writing in "Typographica," quoted in Poyner (2001) p76. "Typographica" was the house magazine for Lund Humphries and was edited by Herbert Spencer. The magazine was an important forcing ground for the development of an intelligent visual language for the 1960s. The dynamic art-direction promoted by Spencer was evidenced through the development of illustrated magazines through the 1960s.

These difficulties notwithstanding, political anxieties about national identity, multiculturalism and citizenship can all usefully be addressed through graphic design and visual communication. This has been acknowledged by the recent formation of the Red Unit at the Design Council.¹⁹ Space must be found for local, small scale and modestly resourced initiatives. Since these characteristics are irreconcilable with the centralised demands of big government new ways of working must be found. Historical precedent shows that more modest proposals and community scaled activities are more likely to have an effect. A spirit of neighbourly co-operation is needed. The emancipatory and radical experience of participation (process) will define any contribution as much as the work (product).

The huge expansion in creative education that has occurred in the last in recent years may provide the key to mobilising at a local level. At the University of Kingston and Richmond College, graphic communication students are involved with an initiative to improve the quality of communications between local public service providers and their public. For the students it is an opportunity to work on real briefs and to escape the college. For clients it offers a chance to effect change with modest resources. For both it offers a new possibility of outreach and connection at a local level.

The initiative began as a response to the grim environments of public provision, particularly the college buildings in which the students work. The significance of environment in education is well established when it comes to recruiting students. Nowhere are the presentation of environment and experience so closely linked as in our great public schools. The same is true of private health care environments in contrast to those of public provision.

¹⁹ Cottam and Leadbetter (2004) have examined design and environmental issues in relation to the organisation of health education, provision and consumption. The project continues.

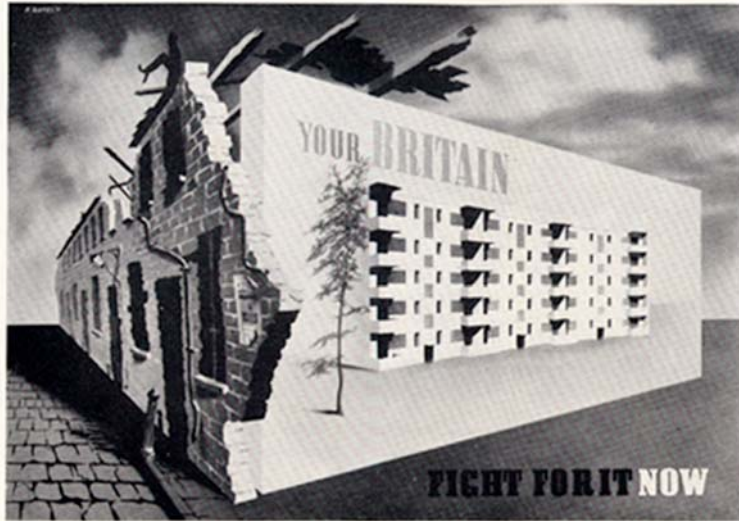
Of course there are the possibilities of big infrastructure redevelopments, but an opportunity exists to make an immediate difference to the experience of the environment of public provision. No substantial extra resources are required, just an attention to detail and an acknowledgement that appearances, ethics and environment and experience are connected; perhaps in ways that we hadn't imagined. The projects at Kingston and Richmond are an attempt to provide an alternative projection of public provision.

The relationship between utility and morality is such visual projections are complex. It is not sufficient to prioritise issues of access, language and point-size. Indeed, all of these issues can be addressed, as they were in the Miami voting paper, and the result remains illegible and confusing.

The changes implicit in the shift towards a political economy of digital images will automatically transform the nature of political discourse by prioritising the visual. The potential for personal expression and the development of community-based networks of digital exchange will offer the possibility of a revisualisation of contemporary citizenship through the re-presentation of the individual as citizen and participatory and contributing action. It is imperative that our political culture recognises this and works to embrace this energy for change. The challenge will be to do so and, at the same time, to resist the controlling, and limiting, tendencies of our political establishment.

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Poster for the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (Housing) 1942.
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Paul and Karen Rennie collection



WW2 industrial safety poster for RoSPA by G R Morris 1942
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