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Webster: The New Photography

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them more effective in involving the viewer. One became immersed in them; one became carried away. Also, given the lack of time available in which one could ponder the images' meaning (as the result of pressure from the flow of others viewing the exhibit), the unannotated photographs worked acceptably within the context of the exhibit. Within the context of the book and all its trappings, however, the photographs command less of one's total available attention. Combine this with expectations laid for bicultural documentation, and I suspect that the circumstance of translation into a new medium lies at the root of the problem.

We nevertheless must commend the authors for an otherwise valuable publication and exhibition. They have provided us with our first glimpse into how contemporary Hopi Indians visualize themselves and their place within the scheme of things, through the medium of the photograph. They also deserve our recognition for the less overt message this book brings. We are reminded once again that Native Americans are not fossilized artifacts on a museum shelf. Like their Euro-American sisters and brothers, Hopi are expressive people living dynamic lives. And their visualizations and motivations sensitively captured on the photographic emulsion reflect their many ways of living in the face of the winds of time and change, which blow incessantly over their austere beautiful homeland.

References

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Frank Webster. *The New Photography*. London: John Calder, 1980. 262 pp. \$22.50 (cloth), \$14.95 (paper).

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Webster has written an introductory textbook on the relationship of culture and photographic communication. The purposes of the book are to describe the theory, objectives, and practice of the "new photography" and to redirect photographic education away from perspectives grounded in technology, aesthetics, and artistic creativity toward an appreciation of sociological, political, cultural, and ideological dimensions of pictorial representation. The applied context is introduced as follows: "My intent . . . [is] to convince the visual communicator to reflect upon his culture, to question meanings frequently taken for granted and to research assiduously into the complexity of his society's ways of seeing. This should be a prerequisite to intellectual and effective communication" (p. 67). As such, the book could be used in undergraduate courses on photographic education, visual communication, sociological photography, or visual anthropology.

Webster initially criticizes the weaknesses of certain "technicist" approaches used by educators who tend to ignore the social, political, and cultural components of visual communication. Criticizing the technicist ethos as a myopic, self-indulgent view of photographic practice, the author argues for a genuinely accepted realization that "all photography is an attempt at capturing, recording and projecting *meaning*. . . . Photography as an attempt at communicating, as a practice centrally involved with meaning, was ignored in favour of a science which aimed for a grasp of chemical and optical skills and little else" (p. 12). "We should avoid working with notions of a set of techniques which supply a vocabulary for photography" (p. 16).

These objectives set the stage for Webster's description of the "new photography." Described as a way of thinking that emerged in the late sixties and early seventies, Webster says, "The 'old' photography was and is an *unreflective* view . . . [T]he new photography believes its predecessors overlooked a whole series of questions which nowadays can be seen as axiomatic to the visual communicator (p. 4). . . . [T]he new photography insists that we recognize image creation as an attempt at communication. . . . Necessarily this requires coming to terms with the *social* in photography. In turn it insists that the photographer recognizes his role in society. . . . What is

important is the intention of using photography to project *meaning*. There is consequently a question of interpretation, communications and social analysis (p. 6). . . . In short the activity of photography is a communicative process which necessarily implies a social location" (p. 6). In a later chapter Webster adds: "The new photographers . . . reject any notion that pictures should be produced merely for one's self-satisfaction or be devoid of social comment. Instead, they analyze for ideological affiliation" (p. 148).

Webster continues by applying the semantic and pragmatic emphases of a semiotic approach to cultural contexts: "Communication regarded as a process, cannot be separated from a cultural context (p. 22). . . . [C]ulture is an inseparable constituent of communication" (p. 19). Readers are given an introductory exposure to several key concepts in cultural anthropology. The author describes and illustrates relationships between socialization, culture, and "ways of seeing." Emphasis is placed on standard phenomenological tenets such as tacit ways of knowing, out-of-awareness learning, taken-for-granted assumptions, background expectations— notions very familiar to readers of this journal. Webster's version of anthropology is quite straightforward, but at times it borders on being too simplistic (see "The Contribution of Cultural Anthropology," pp. 45–67). The author cites the value of cross-cultural studies to counteract ethnocentric statements that relate notions of "naturalness" to "ways of seeing." Attempts should be made to enlighten both photographers and viewers that cultures create and use alternative ways of looking at situations, have different understandings of "what's there," and can contribute dissimilar interpretations to similar images. Students are asked to avoid stereotypical, culture-bound reductions of information, and instead treat images and image making as problematic. However, Webster neglects the work of American scholars who have worked on these questions as part of an anthropology of visual communication.

Webster's attention to the relationship of meaning and photographic imagery is also found in Chapters 4 ("The Politicization of Photography") and 6 ("Semiology: Principles and Practices"). The author has included a discussion of semiotics because of his conviction that "every communication system can be analyzed as a series of codes. . . . Codes are . . . systems of meaning, interpretive devices, which make possible the communication of individual signs. . . . Semiotics seeks to determine the codes which underlie communications of signs" (p. 188). Webster adds: "Especially significant is semiology's stress on the process of signification, the artificiality of signs, and the need for analysis of coding procedures" (p. 204). Readers are given an integrated overview of contributions by Ferdinand de Saussure, Umberto Eco, Charles Peirce, and Roland Barthes. Webster at-

tempts to keep his explanations as simple as possible, but at times individual author's concepts become inappropriately related to one another, e.g., his discussion of how de Saussure and Barthes conceptualize the sign.

The author also justifies the inclusion of what he calls an "uncritical review" of semiotic principles because semiotics provides "a number of concepts and insights which are useful critical weapons against former orthodox practices in the field" (p. 165). However, Webster also offers the following concession: "I feel that a more fertile tradition for establishing photographic analysis can be found in the field of sociology and certain literary criticism" than in semiotics.

At times I found Webster reluctant to follow his own good advice, and I questioned if he had genuinely internalized his own theoretical orientation. Perhaps I am being too suspicious because lip service to the social orientation is so common. For instance, throughout the book Webster endeavors to make his readers more sensitive to image interpretation. His "photographic paradox" stems from a problem of interpretation: The photograph "is both 'natural' (an exact record of that which was/is there) and hence does not need to be translated and simultaneously it is symbolic and thus dependent for its meaning upon the capacity of viewers to interpret, using their knowledge of an array of culturally specific conventions. *The photographic paradox lies in the need for translation alongside translation's redundancy*" (p. 157). Clearly Webster has been strongly influenced by Barthes' controversial dictum regarding the "analogon" and treating the photographic image as a message without a code. To me this seems to conflict with the importance that Webster places on cultural context, social grounding, and situational circumstance.

Other hints of contradiction and confusion appear in the author's treatment of photographic images as "exact records" and claims that photography "captures a scene literally, precisely: it tells us 'this is exactly how it is'" (p. 154). It would be more instructive to discuss how members of society have been led to think this way about certain examples of photographic representation (certainly not all forms), and how we invest a sense of credibility in camera-generated pictures. An approach grounded in cultural anthropology should have a lot to contribute to a clarification of these questions.

Further confusion is introduced when the author presents an image for some form of analytic discussion. For instance, in Chapter 5, Webster describes a photograph using the following language: "Picture an injured child, perhaps five years old, heavily bandaged around the head. The child clutches a teddy-bear and stares ahead with wideopen eyes" (p. 158). But this is all the information we are given regarding

the content and presentational format of the image. We do, however, get to see the photograph on page 154, and here it is captioned "After the Raid by Cecil Beaton, 1940." In another instance, we read: "Imagine a shot of an eight-year-old boy, dishevelled clothes, dirty face and so on" (p. 187). Again, nothing is said regarding where such an image appears; information regarding type of publication, private vs. public communication, associated "story" or narrative, function of the picture has been overlooked and seemingly taken for granted. The point is a simple one—namely, pictorial forms, far more often than not, come to us for interpretation enmeshed in communicative contexts. Competent interpretations result from subtle out-of-awareness processes of cross-referencing pictorial codes, presentation contexts, and a wealth of previous personal experiences with pictures. This process is far more complicated than a matter of linguistic "anchoring" found, for instance, in captions as suggested by Webster (p. 187). Interpretations result from acknowledging relationships which, in turn, often surround *sequences* of images rather than an isolated example—another point overlooked in the author's account of significant contextual features.

Another problem is related to the issue of picture presentation. Webster states: "The new photographers insist that we acknowledge the *social* situation of image production" (p. 148). Reference is also made to observing the social and economic structures of the photographic industry as well as the "need to come to terms with the operation of specific *relations* of production" (p. 6). Given these good intentions, it is ironic that so little is said about the actual presentation and/or display of photographic images—an area that might be called "the sociology of publication." While a two-paragraph disclaimer appears on the next-to-last page of the book, the author could have made a much greater contribution by including more discussion on social, political, and economic factors that structure the publication process. Again, this represents another frequently overlooked dimension of context. Details of social organization in newspaper and magazine publications, demands of the workplace, value orientations relevant to the editorial process, physical restraints of display could have been discussed through Webster's notion of subculture (pp. 57–59). As the author notes, much work needs to be done in this area.

I was initially drawn to *The New Photography* for two reasons. For the teaching of courses on visual/pictorial communication in an anthropology department, it has been important to find a book that presents the rudiments of an anthropological approach to visual media. As I have implied, the book can be used to generate discussion, disagreement, and argument. This book provides many useful entry

points to stimulate more intensive investigation of contributions by John Berger, Ernst Gombrich, Sol Worth, Nancy Munn, Roland Barthes, Howard Becker, and Nelson Goodman, among others. Webster's text may also be used to introduce problems in the sociology of media production as well as hermeneutic and phenomenological constructions of pictorial realities.

In a more personal context, my research interests have also focused on how "the social" is useful to understanding relationships of meaning and context to pictorial communication. In some instances, our objectives have been similar: to explore components and principles of verbal communication (both written and spoken forms) that facilitate the explication of how visual/pictorial modes "work" in a variety of contexts. Webster's text parallels my own efforts to displace certain inappropriate linguistic applications in favor of exploring how certain sociolinguistic axioms relate better to pictorial communication. This forms the base of what I have elsewhere called "sociovidistics" (Chalfen 1981). For instance, Webster calls attention to relating a generalized notion of language to visual communication, the relevance of socialization processes, and specifically Basil Bernstein's theories of sociolinguistic codes to culturally structured processes of pictorial interpretation (see Chapter 7). Webster gives his readers hints of relevance and implications for additional investigation.

I would have preferred that Webster took some of his axioms a few steps further. He makes a plea for us to enlarge our critical treatment of photography, implying that maybe different types of photographic practice involve different kinds of communication. While he focuses on advertisements and photojournalistic practice, he also mentions fine art and fashion photography—but only in passing. His world of discussion and comment is limited to professional domains; the ubiquity of nonprofessional forms and the structure of amateur photographic practice are overlooked. Do scholars exert an ethnocentric or even a "media-centric" reduction when initially asked to consider "snaps" (Webster's term) as a legitimate form, embedded in a home made of pictorial communication? From Webster's descriptions, I would not expect the catholic interests of the new photography to eliminate such questions. Perhaps the next book—*The Latest Photography*—will incorporate some of these ideas.

Reference

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