

Educació i Història: Revista d'Història de l'Educació
Núm. 15 (gener-juny, 2010), pàg. 149-164
Societat d'Història de l'Educació dels Països de Llengua Catalana
ISSN: 1134-0258

DOI: 10.2436/20.3009.01.58

FOTOGRAFIA I HISTÒRIA DE L'EDUCACIÓ

The school album:
images, insights and inequalities¹
L'àlbum de l'escola:
imatges, introspecció i desigualtats

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Data de recepció de l'original: febrer de 2010

Data d'acceptació: març de 2010

ABSTRACT

Photographs, as Elizabeth Edwards noted in her essay on the photography of Susan Meiselas, are «cultural objects», made to «project certain meanings and elicit certain affects». Traditionally, historians, when they have worked with photographs, have been generally concerned with extracting evidence about the materiality of the past. This is done by looking at what is made present in an image. However, the meaning[s] we take from photographs are always framed by the context in which we come upon them and looking always has a subjective quality which shapes the ideas that are formed in dialogue with an image and the meanings that are then constructed. Using a 1920s school photographic album of Floodgate Street Infant School from 1920s Birmingham, England this small essay will explore the nature of images, their hidden meanings and the importance of contextualizing the visual. This exploration of

¹ This paper was first delivered at an ESRC funded *Visual Dialogues* Seminar at the Open University, Milton Keynes, England, 25 January 2010. My thanks to the organizers Janet Fink, Helen Lomax and Gillian Rose and the participants.

the visual is grouped around four different categories of context the archive as a site of memory; the knowing gaze; the technology of display; and the singularity of the image. The essay also considers the idea of the «social biography» of an image and how digitization can transform original images and their meaning.

KEY WORDS: schooling; social biography; the knowing gaze; display; digitization

RESUM

Les fotografies, tal com Elisabeth Edwards va observar al seu article sobre la fotografia de Susan Meiselas, són «objectes culturals» fets per «projectar certs significats i provocar certs afectes». Tradicionalment, els historiadors que han treballat amb imatges han tingut interès, en general, a extreure'n l'evidència de la materialitat del passat, i això es pot portar a terme a través de mirar el que s'ha fet present en una imatge. No obstant això, el significat o els significats que se'n poden extreure sempre estan emmarcats en el context que les imatges mateixes proporcionen, i el fet d'observar sempre té una qualitat subjectiva que perfila les idees que es creen, en forma de diàleg, entre la imatge i els significats que se n'han construït amb posterioritat. A partir de les imatges d'un àlbum fotogràfic de l'escola Floodgate Street Infant School de Birmingham (Anglaterra), dels anys vint del segle XX, aquest breu assaig explora la naturalesa d'aquestes imatges, els seus significats amagats i la importància de contextualitzar-les. L'exploració visual d'aquestes imatges s'agrupa en quatre diferents categories de context: l'arxiu com un lloc de la memòria; la mirada experta; les tecnologies de l'exhibició; i la singularitat de la imatge. Aquest assaig també té en compte la idea de la «biografia social» d'una imatge i com la digitalització pot transformar imatges originals i els seus significats.

PARAULES CLAU: escolarització, biografia social, la mirada experta, exhibició, digitalització.

RESUMEN

Las fotografías, así como Elisabeth Edwards observó en su artículo sobre la fotografía de Susan Meiselas, son «objetos culturales» hechos para «proyectar ciertos significados y provoca ciertos afectos». Tradicionalmente, los historiadores que han trabajado con imágenes han tenido interés, en general, en extraer la evidencia de la materia-

lidad del pasado, y esto se puede llevar a cabo a través de mirar lo que se hace presente en una imagen. Sin embargo, el significado o significados que se pueden extraer están siempre enmarcados en el contexto que ellas mismas proporcionan, y el hecho de observar siempre tiene una cualidad subjetiva que perfila las ideas que se crean, en forma de diálogo, entre la imagen y los significados que se han construido con posterioridad. A partir de las imágenes de un álbum fotográfico de la escuela Floodgate Street Infant School de Birmingham (Inglaterra), de los años veinte, del siglo XX, este breve ensayo explora la naturaleza de estas imágenes, sus significados ocultos y la importancia de contextualizarlas. La exploración visual de estas imágenes se agrupa en cuatro diferentes categorías de contexto: el archivo como un lugar de la memoria; la mirada experta; las tecnologías de la exhibición; y la singularidad de la imagen. Este ensayo también tiene en cuenta la idea de la biografía «social» de una imagen y como la digitalización puede transformar imágenes originales y sus significados.

PALABRAS CLAVE: escolarización, biografía social, la mirada experta, exhibición, digitalización.

INTRODUCTION: THE SCHOOL ALBUM

The album consists of fourteen photographs. On the front of the album are the words «School Photographs Floodgate St Infants». All but one of the photographs is mounted and each page has a caption written in the same hand as that on the front cover. The photographs vary in size with some having small white borders. The unmounted photograph is the last image in the album and does not match the others being produced as a postcard rather than an album photograph. The album is fragile but there is no evidence of images being lost over time.

The first four photographs are all related to a school visit to Manor Farm and have the following captions «Our Party at Manor Farm», «More of the Party», «More at Manor Farm» and «By the Swings». In the first photograph there are twenty-five children, girls and boys of roughly the same age, standing in what looks like a field. All of the trees are covered with leaves which suggest the visit is taking place in summer or early autumn. Some of the children are wearing overcoats and most of them have hats. Five of the children are holding wildflowers. On the right edge of the photograph there is a female figure — a teacher — wearing a thick coat and a hat. Most of the children

are not looking at the camera but at some activity happening out of sight and outside the frame. In the second image, taken at the same spot as the first, there are thirteen children and two female adults and are all looking directly at the camera. The adults have on coats but not all of the children. In the third image there are eleven girls and boys but no adults. All of them are looking at the camera; one girl holds a bunch of wildflowers. Only two of the children are wearing coats. In the fourth photograph fourteen girls and boys stand in front of swings. Four children are wearing coats, not all the children are directly looking into the camera, one girl holds a bunch of wildflowers, a boy holds a small branch and another stands casually with his hands in his pockets. The next three pages of the album contain seven small photographs taken in the school playground. Two photographs show three girls having their hair «Bobbed or Shingled» [hair cut to show the shape of the back of the head]. Two photographs show a group of girls and boys standing in front of a wall, a third photograph is of a lone boy. Each of the children is either holding or standing next to a plant. The handwritten captions reads: «Beans we've grown ourselves». The next two photographs capture children dressing up. One is captioned «Three blue bonnets» and shows three girls wearing fancy hats and standing under an umbrella while two boys look on. The second photograph has children dressed as characters from the story of Red Riding Hood, with one of the children wearing a paper wolf mask, another lying on the ground under a sheet, a girl dressed as Red Riding Hood with a basket and a boy holding what looks like a wooden sword. The twelfth photograph is of the interior of a classroom with the caption «Miss Hopkins Class» and there are twenty girls and boys seated behind desks all looking directly at the camera. The penultimate photograph is entitled «Going through Manor House Gardens June 22 1928» and a mixed group of children can be seen in the mid distance, along with one adult, all looking towards the camera. The final photograph is again of a classroom and thirty-five children, sitting behind desks or standing, along with two female adults [teachers] are looking directly at the camera. Finally there are eight blank pages in the album.²

² Birmingham Archives and Heritage [BA&H], Photographic Archive, Press 8 Floodgate Street Infants. Thanks to BA&H for permission to reproduce images from the album and other photographs held in the archive and to Brigitte Winsor in particular for preparing the images and creating Image 1.



DISCUSSION

Photographs are «cultural objects», made to «project certain meanings and elicit certain affects». ³ They are always for a purpose, always in context. Photographs create events by isolating and containing within a frame a moment in time, a moment which is privileged over other instances which are lost. It is also a moment when the subject[s] is/are usually aware that they are being photographed, that they are part of an exchange relationship whereby recording «normality» is the aim of the exercise. Yet, that very moment of recording is also a moment of disruption as the subject aware of what is happening suspends normal social relationships in order to be photographed and by so doing actually alters what it was aimed to record. Photographs are also often «randomly inclusive» carrying an excess of information which «threatens to render them illegible» and as a consequence their possibilities are so various that they cannot be trapped within a single interpretation. ⁴ Further, while the moment is caught in light and becomes a record a surviving fragment amongst many lost past moments – there is always as a consequence of their inclusivity a connection beyond what is recorded, to other moments, subjects, experiences and histories. Finally, the instance rendered by light and chemical, the photographer can further manipulate the captured moment in the printing of the image, and then in placing the captured moment alongside other images or text. ⁵

These observations about the nature of photography will come as no surprise to anyone who has engaged in visual dialogues with the past and the present, but serve here as useful reminders of why researchers are sometimes very wary of the visual demanding extra-photographic authentication before accepting images as evidence of past and present experiences. They also offer some structural pointers for a discussion of the Floodgate Album, its content and history and its meaning[s]. In the remainder of the paper the discussion is grouped around four different categories of context the archive as a site of memory; the knowing gaze; the technology of display; and the singularity of

³ EDWARDS, Elizabeth «Entangled Documents: Visualised Histories» in LUBBEN, Kristen (ed.) *Susan Meiselas: in History*. Gottingen: Steidl, 2008. p. 333.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

⁵ See, for example, SMITH, Terry. «Pictured History: The Matchgirls' Strike 1888» a EVANS, J. (ed.) *The Camerawork Essays. Context and Meaning in Photographs*. London: Rivers Oram Press, 1997, p. 159-60; GROSVENOR, Ian «On Visualising Past Classrooms: Photographs and the History of Education», in GROSVENOR, I.; LAWN, M.; ROUSMANIERE, K. (eds.) *Silences and Images. The Social History of the Classroom*. New York: Peter Lang, p. 83-104.

the image. I recognise that these are artificial categories and the boundaries between them porous, but they allow for the isolation of some issues of practice which affect visual dialogues.

ISSUES OF CONTEXT [1] THE ARCHIVE AS A SITE OF MEMORY

The meaning[s] we take from photographs are always framed by the context in which we come upon them. Sophie Howarth usefully illustrates this point with her comparison to the fictional carbon atom in Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table* (1975). The atom begins a journey in 1840 when a piece of limestone hewn from a cliff is put in a kiln, roasted and carbon released from the calcium to which it had been connected for millennia and the atom then follows a journey of «appearance, disappearance and transformation». The properties of the atom never change but as the years pass and it associates with other atoms it appears and behaves differently. The reader encounters it bound to oxygen as carbon dioxide, combined with hydrogen and phosphorous as glucose, severed as part of a lactic acid chain, and reoxidised once again. So it is with a photograph, the properties of the image do not change, but over its material existence it accumulates and accrues different meanings as it enters into relationships with new contexts and audiences. As a consequence, there is a need to «examine the *life* of an image» (or as Elizabeth Edwards terms it, the *social biography* of an image) to consider its *circulation* and its *currency* «as it moves through time and space from context to context».⁶

Archives are institutional sites of memory. They hold the traces of the past from which histories are written. In this sense they authorize the stories we tell about the past. The Floodgate Album is now a part of an extensive designated photographic archive in Birmingham, England. Here it exists alongside other collections in a repository of knowledge which offers researchers access to different historical experiences. Its social biography is one of an album carefully constructed by a teacher where images were selected, sequenced, placed on the page and captions written alongside; it was then carefully stored at home but occasionally brought into school; in time it has been acquired or deposited as an artefact in the archive; it has been accessioned, catalogued and placed in a solander box; it has been digitised, electronically circulated and reconfigured

⁶ WALKER, John A. «Context as a Determinant of Photographic Meaning», in EVANS, J. (ed) *The Camerawork Essays. Context and Meaning in Photographs*. London: Rivers Oram Press, 1997, p. 57.

to create something new; it has been absorbed within a collection, a collection which can increasingly be explored remotely online where images become free-floating signifiers, losing their identity as they are submerged in the single archive which is the internet⁷; and its future involves being a part of an exhibition on Children's Lives in Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in 2012. With each step the photograph will have been recontextualised, and as the context changes so does the meaning. The «truth» value of photographs is fluid depending upon the context in which they are viewed.

ISSUE OF CONTEXT [2] THE KNOWING GAZE

I encountered the Floodgate Street Album in Birmingham City Archives. This encounter, this interaction with the album was a «knowing» one. I know this school. I know its history. It was not possible for me to look at the photographs in the album without visualising the school itself and its location in the cityscape. By just reading the cover of the album, I already pictured its contents, and anticipated seeing children with whom I was very familiar.

The Infant Department was located in what was originally Floodgate Board School which had opened in 1891 in the heart of what was regarded as the worst slum area in Birmingham. Built to accommodate over a thousand elementary and infant aged children the area around the school was one of factories, warehouses, railway lines, canal wharves and dense back-to-back courtyard housing. On the ground floor where the infants were there was frosted glazing in the lower panels of windows to stop children being distracted by passing vehicles. The noise and dirt in the air from nearby manufacturing also meant that the windows in the school remain closed. The inability to open the windows due to the pollution resulted in the use of a hot air ventilation system, sucking in air from a high-level «Plenum» tower, heating it in the basement, and expelling it through vents in the window sills.⁸

The area was a focus for the activities of education and related professionals and voluntary organisations.⁹ The records produced by these professionals and

⁷ See, MARGOLIS, Eric. «Class Pictures: Representations of Race, Gender and Ability in a Century of School Photography». *Visual Sociology*, 14, 1999, p. 8-9

⁸ See CRAIG, Victoria. What can be learned about the educational and architectural attitudes of Martin and Chamberlain Architects, and the Birmingham School Board, from Floodgate Street School, Deritend, unpublished MA study, Birmingham City University [UCE] nd.

⁹ See WRIGHT, Susannah. «The work of teachers and others in and around a Birmingham slum school

organisations often reflected a «restricted vocabulary of descriptors»¹⁰ where the language used was informed by a broader discourse around urban slums and essentially addressed three interconnected themes: poverty, a «wastrel class» of inhabitants and problem families.¹¹ The school functioned as a site for gathering and circulating knowledge about local children, «for distributing resources, and for decisions about the referral of children between different statutory and voluntary agencies»¹²

The question is can the «unknowing» viewer see what I see in these photographs? Of course, knowing who they are, I want to look even closer. I magnify each image and start to see the inequalities that I know shaped their lives: the tear in a girl's dress, the general poor quality of their clothing, the outfits a size too big. In this sense, a photograph as David Levi Strauss observed, «doesn't need to prove anything on its own; it corroborates and confirms what we already know». ¹³



1891-1920», *History of Education*, 38, 6, 2009, p. 729-746.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the language of educational discourse see GROSVENOR, Ian; MYERS, Kevin. «Progressivism, Control and Correction: Local Education Authorities and Educational Policy in Twentieth Century England». *Paedagogica Historica* 42, 1&2, 2006.

¹¹ WRIGHT, Susannah. «The work of teachers and others in and around a Birmingham slum school 1891-1920», ... op. cit. p. 736.

¹² Ibid, p. 737.

¹³ STRAUSS, David Levi. *Between the Eyes. Essays on Photography and Politics*. New York: Aperture, 2003, p.74.

Making meaning, drawing historical insights from the album is contingent on acknowledging and understanding if possible the intention of the photographer at the moment of production, but also being willing and able to look for other possible disruptions, to elicit meanings which are grounded in the captured reality of the frame. Michel Foucault advised, «Never consent to being completely comfortable with your own certainties».¹⁴ The danger here is of being a too «knowing» viewer who looks, but does not see. Knowing can be a barrier to seeing, a limitation on what otherwise are the fluid economies of meaning. Further «knowing» is always accompanied by a particular form of understanding, as «human subjects» we «cannot be written out of the identity of the things that we see», there is a subjective quality to our looking.¹⁵ I know this school, but I also believe I understand how it functioned.

Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) identified schools as being constructed to be «pedagogical machines» disciplining the body of the child [and the teacher], and placing them within a system of continued surveillance.¹⁶ The photograph in the album of children sitting in rows of desks indicates for me how the design of school furniture dictated bodily posture and how children were trained to sit still.



¹⁴ FOUCAULT, Michel. «For an ethics of discomfort», in LOTRINGER, S.; HOCHROTH, L. (Eds.) *The politics of truth: Michel Foucault*. New York, 1997, p. 144. See also, HARWOOD, Valerie; RASMUSSEN, Mary Louise. «Studying Schools with an ‘Ethics of Discomfort’», in BAKER, Bernadette M.; HEYNING, Katharina E. (Eds) *Dangerous Coagulations, The Uses of Foucault in the Study of Education*. New York, 2004, p. 305-21.

¹⁵ PEIM, N. «The History of the Present: Towards a Contemporary Phenomenology of the School». *History of Education* 30, 2, 2001, p.177.

¹⁶ See, FOUCAULT, M. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 1977. Part Three: Discipline.

The classroom photograph itself represents an act of surveillance and a demonstration of order.¹⁷ As Betty Eggermont observed «If the stereotypical, simultaneous actions of a group of children transformed them into a class, the photograph was its identification». ¹⁸ In this case, I don't think the subjective quality of knowing and understanding is a problem. Indeed, the advantage of being a «knowing» viewer is that it allows me to some extent to recognise and acknowledge that the children in the photographs are not passive objects but self-authoring subjects engaged in a dialogue with the photographer. It is «knowing» which is historically aware, which is critical in the face of the avalanche of images of schooling which are now circulating on the internet¹⁹. Further, what the school records demonstrate and the images show is that the dominant version of elementary schooling in urban areas of struggle, educational failure and a restricted curriculum does not necessarily accord with the reality of pupil experiences.

Floodgate Street since its opening in the 1890s had a tradition of school organised visits to the countryside and of teachers working hard to enhance the learning experiences of children and the involvement of their parents.²⁰ The school log book records both the appointment of Miss Gwendoline Mary Hopkins in 1919 and the school being closed on 2nd July 1926 for a day's holiday and staff, «through the kindness of Mrs George Cadbury» taking 107 children to Manor Farm, Northfield where everyone «enjoyed a delightful day». ²¹ It was an event which was repeated with another 124 children on 22 June 1928. The school records tells us about parent's socials being organised by the teachers, of a Christmas party where «every boy had a motor and every girl a teaset», of the school being a centre for free dinners and a subsidised milk scheme, of children and parents attending a carol service and of a circus elephant being brought into the school hall and of the infant children feeding it «with biscuits and sugar», of pupil work being annually exhibited and of children saving throughout the year money «for Blind babies». A school inspection report of 1928 captures in detail what the school was like:

¹⁷ See MARGOLIS, E.; FRAM, S. «Caught Napping: Images of Surveillance, Discipline and Punishment on the Body of the Schoolchild», *History of Education*, 36, 2, 2007, p. 191-211.

¹⁸ EGGERMONT, Betty. «The Choreography of Schooling as Site of Struggle: Belgian Primary Schools, 1880-1940». *History of Education* 30, 2, 2001, p. 133.

¹⁹ See, MARGOLIS, Eric «Class Pictures...» op. cit. p. 8-9

²⁰ See WRIGHT. «The work of teachers...»... op.cit. p. 738-739 ; Birmingham Archives and Heritage S68/1/1 Floodgate Street School Infant Log Book

²¹ Manor Farm was owned by the Cadbury family

«This school has a difficult task. In addition to the normal work of every Infant's Department it has to inculcate habits of personal cleanliness, to extend the limited ideas of the children, and to train them in clear and ready speech.

The Head Mistress, with a sympathetic and intelligent understanding of the needs of her young charges, has had the loyal support and active cooperation of every member of her staff ... Together they create an atmosphere of calmness and kindness, in which the children can develop happily together, they are indefatigable in providing from their own resources or through their friends all types of material to enlarge the experiences of the children, and so to compensate, as far as possible, for the deficiencies of the home environment»

Despite, or because, of the hardship of growing up in Birmingham's slums teachers made a difference. Indeed, in Birmingham in the past it was often the case and still remains so today to some extent that the schools in the poorest areas of the city were some of the most educationally progressive.

ISSUE OF CONTEXT [3] THE TECHNOLOGY OF DISPLAY

Looking at the Floodgate album was for me a tactile experience as it involved turning the pages in order to follow the story, to let moments connect with one another. Without bringing the album out of the archive, its fragility would never allow this, how is it possible to convey its materiality and the experience of connecting the meanings that the images elicit? At the recent photographic exhibition «La Subversion des Images»²² at the Centre Pompidou this problem of access was partially solved by displaying albums in Perspex cases while the images inside were presented sequentially on a monitor. The solution for this paper was to use new imaging technologies to present the album as a single page. This has, of course, created something totally new which is very different to the original album. Digitisation enables greater access but removing the tactile experience and replacing it with reading images on a screen generates a sense of loss, a further distancing from the past.

²² *La Subversion des images. Surrealism, Photography and Film*, Centre Pompidou 29 September 2009-11 January 2010.

This also brings me to another point about the use of the visual: the issue of believability or rather as Fred Ritchin would term it the crisis of believability.²³ Through light and chemicals photography mechanically reproduced the «real» and consequently «materialized seeing in a new way»²⁴. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries photographs acquired an aura of believability. However, new imaging technologies have shifted the relationship between the real and the artificial and as a consequence the believability of visual evidence has become increasingly compromised as a source of «truth». This is a critical issue for all researchers engaged in developing visual dialogues.

ISSUE OF CONTEXT [4] THE SINGULARITY OF THE IMAGE

It is unclear when in the social biography of the Floodgate album the postcard image was inserted.



²³ RITCHIN, Fred. *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography/Hoe Computer Technology is Changing Our View of the World*

²⁴ STRAUSS, David Levi *Between the Eyes*, 71.

It is certainly contemporary with the other images. Taking it out of the album it is readily apparent that it is of a different order to the other images being produced and published to be locally sold by the photographer.²⁵ Removed from the album it is a reminder that images can stand alone, and the value, as Sophie Howarth has written, of concentrating on their singularity.²⁶ The photograph is presented as a classroom photograph, but internal clues such as the large doorway on the left, the deliberate layout of the desks in a crescent shape and the general «posed» nature of the image suggest it is taking place in the schoolroom or hall. The ‘reconstruction’ of a classroom in a larger space was a common photographic technique used in the genre of school photography as it emerged in the late nineteenth century.²⁷ Further, the image is carefully constructed with the balanced symmetry of the two teachers positioned to occupy two sides of the frame and the taking of the photograph being presented as a disruption to the children’s otherwise engagement with learning and creative play. What does poverty look like? I pose this question deliberately as the children in this image do not appear to be malnourished and yet, as stated earlier, these children came from one of the poorest areas in the city and the school had a history of high levels of pupil illness and truancy and it was an area and where bad weather caused low attendance because the children were so poorly clothed they could not leave home. It was also an area where parents regularly removed their children from school for seasonal work to supplement family income.²⁸ It could be that as part of this carefully orchestrated photograph the parents and children knowing that the photograph was being taken colluded in its construction. Alternatively, perhaps by the 1920s families living in the area were materially better off, and the children mainly impoverished in terms of their education and life opportunities as suggested in the school inspection report. That said, the report is very positive about pupil achievement despite «the deficiencies of the home environment». The school inspector reported that «many of the children» showed «commendable power and steadiness in individual work»,

²⁵ See PHILLIPS, Tom. *The Postcard Century*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2000, p. 24-25

²⁶ HOWARTH, Sophie. *Singular Images. Essays on Remarkable Photographs*. London: Tate. 2005, p. 7.

²⁷ See GROSVENOR, Ian «On Visualising Past Classrooms: Photographs and the History of Education», in GROSVENOR, I.; LAWN; M.; ROUSMANIERE; K. (eds.) *Silences and Images. The Social History of the Classroom*. New York: Peter Lang. 1999, p. 83-104; GROSVENOR, Ian. «Images of Education: from Bubbles to This England», in BRASTER, Sjaak; DEL POZO; Maria del Mar; GROSVENOR, Ian (eds) *Inside the Black Box of the Classroom*. Berlin: Peter Lang, forthcoming.

²⁸ See Birmingham Archives and Heritage S68/1/1 Floodgate Street School Infant Log Book

singing reached «an unusually high standard», and in Handwork children attained «considerable skill» particularly in «observation drawing and the development of design». It follows from this that an area which needs further investigation is that of social mobility. What happened to these children as they progressed through schooling and as families migrated to the new suburbs on the edge of the city? This line of inquiry points once more to the value of record linkage, with written sources being used in dialogue with photographs not as a means of authentication, but rather to produce thicker descriptions of the past. Going back to the photograph it also offers a visual statement about the importance of family: boy, girl and baby. The «a girl» may be a coincidence, but words both anchor and relay additional meaning. The picture of St George and the baby Jesus also point to the importance of Christianity in this infant school community. Finally, to return briefly to the particularity of the «knowing gaze», the two reproduction images of paintings by John Everett Millais *Cherry Ripe* (1879) and *Bubbles* (1886) which adorn the school wall had been made available as ‘civilizing’ modern images to Birmingham schools in the 1880s. The fact that they were still on display in the 1920s might be a further indicator of the poverty of the area with the school not having sufficient funds to change the display.²⁹

VISUAL DIALOGUES: THE SCHOOL ALBUM - IMAGES, INSIGHTS AND INEQUALITIES.

Traditionally, historians, when they have worked with photographs, have been generally concerned with extracting evidence about the materiality of the past. This is done by looking at what is made present in an image. Looking, however, always has a subjective quality which shapes the ideas that are formed in dialogue with an image and the meanings that are then constructed. At the same time, as I hope shown here, the particularities of local knowledge can bring additional insights and understandings when confronted with single or multiple images. Such particularities will be of increasing importance for meaning making as new technologies facilitate the creation of extensive memory banks which while increasing access to the past also have the potential to generate a greater distance from it through, what Allen Sekula termed, their «semantic availability»:

²⁹ See GROSVENOR «Images of Education» for a discussion of the role and nature of school wall displays.

«Mass culture and mass education lean heavily on photographic realism, mixing pedagogy and entertainment in an avalanche of images ... But awareness of history as an interpretation of the past succumbs to a faith in history as representation. The viewer is confronted not by historical writing, but by the appearances of history itself».³⁰

This brings this paper back full circle - the importance of context in any visual dialogue, whether with the past or the present.

³⁰ SEKULA, A. «Photography between Labor and Capital», in BUCHLOH, B.H.D.; WILKI, R. (eds) *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton: 1948-1968*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983. 194, 198