

Text from Stephen Bull's, *Photography*

Analysis of Martin Parr's *Conservative 'Midsummer Madness' Party* in terms of denotation and connotation; framing the image under the headings, '**Words**', '**Context**' and '**Discourse**'

John A Walker has discussed his experience of asking students at an art college to interpret a photograph. He was concerned to discover that many students subscribed to what he calls 'the ideology of individualism': the argument that 'individuals are unique therefore everyone is different, therefore everyone interprets images differently, therefore one cannot speak about *the* meaning of an image; there are as many meanings as there are human beings' (Walker 1997: 52). Therefore, as Walker says, if an image has billions of meanings it may as well be meaningless. However, a photograph's meanings are not entirely unique to each individual. Not only does the content of the photograph limit the meaning (Parr's image of the tea, for example, is very likely to communicate something about tea and Britishness, but very unlikely to have anything to do with, say, pasta and Italianicity; see Slater 1997a: 93) but also, as we shall examine in the following sections, the words that accompany a photograph, the contexts in which a photograph is seen, and the wider discourses of which the photograph is a part, are three further ways by which meanings may be guided and fixed. (The position of the viewer in relation to the photograph, including the idea of personal interpretation, is analysed further in the second part of this chapter.)

FIXING MEANINGS: WORDS

This section, and the next two sections, will use another photograph by Parr as a case study to investigate how the meanings of an image can be fixed and can change. Later on I will reveal when Parr made the photograph and where it has since appeared, but to begin with we will only examine it in terms of both the denotation and connotation of its content.

The photograph (see Figure 3.2) shows six people in the back garden of a house. Two men wearing suits and ties are standing amid the hollyhocks, one holding a plate and fork, the other a glass of wine. The first man's lips are pursed and his eyes are downcast, the out-of-focus grey wedge of a neighbouring house's guttering runs vertically from the top centre of the picture to just above his head. The man with the glass has cocked his head to one. Behind him the leg of a woman in a flowery skirt sitting in a folding chair is visible and between the two men a third man with grey hair and a moustache sits holding a glass of wine. The right of the picture is dominated by a white-haired woman in a flowery dress and matching green necklace, an empty plate (like the man's, made out of china not paper), with knife and fork (metal not plastic) neatly placed together, rests in her lap. Slightly out of focus and illuminated by flash, she looks to the right of the photograph into which some more white hair, as



Figure 3.2 Martin Parr *Conservative 'Midsummer Madness' Party* (1988) © Martin Parr / Magnum Photos.

well as a slither of the side of a head and a hand intrude: just enough visual information to surmise that there is another person partly out of shot.

In her book *Visual Methodologies*, Gillian Rose lists what Gillian Dyer has referred to as the 'signs of humans' that viewers interpret. These include the representation of bodies, manner and activities, combined with props and settings (see Rose 2007: 81–82). Rose notes that to interpret the codes of these human signs requires 'extensive knowledge of images of culturally specific social difference and social relations' (2007: 82). Applying this kind of semiotic analysis to the bodies, manner, activities, props and settings in the Parr photograph, the overall connotation of the image could be interpreted as that of a polite but socially tense occasion. The gestural codes of conversation we see in the photograph are combined with facial expressions connoting boredom or even conflict. Every visible mouth is firmly shut. No one looks too pleased to be there. The suits and ties (one with an insignia), red wine, china plates and metal cutlery also connote that these people may well be middle-class and are probably very aspirational.

Liz Kotz has argued that 'the fusion of words and photographic images' is one of the basic elements of visual culture: almost every time

photographs appear they are joined with language 'as caption, headline, surrounding text, intertitle, or spoken voiceover or dialogue' (Kotz 2006: 513). Burgin has acknowledged the important effect written text has on photographic meaning (Burgin 1986a), while writers including Richard Chalfen and Elizabeth Edwards have noted the vital impact that the spoken words that can surround photographs have on how we interpret them (Chalfen 1987: 119–130; Edwards 2009: 37–42). (See Chapter 5 for more analysis of 'spoken words' in relation to photographs.)

In 'Rhetoric of the Image' Barthes suggests that written text works with photographs in two ways: anchorage and relay (1977b: 37–41). Text as *anchorage* tends to function as a written equivalent to what appears in the image. It tells the viewer with some precision what they are looking at, fixing the meaning of the photograph the way an anchor moors a boat in place. Barthes says that this form of text is most commonly found with press photographs and advertising. Today, the caption of a press photograph still tends to confirm the 'who, what, why, where and when' of the image, but – as I will go on to argue below – the use of text in advertising has changed considerably since Barthes wrote his essay in the 1960s.

The text at the bottom of the Panzani pasta products advert reads (in French) 'Pasta. Sauce. Parmesan' and 'Italian Luxury'. This anchors the viewer's reading of the image by directing their attention to the manufactured products within the photograph – telling us for sure that it is not selling us the bag or the vegetables – and confirming the reading of the advert as connoting an idea of high-quality, authentic Italian food (even if the text within the image on the labels of the Panzani products tells us the food is manufactured in France – such is the persuasion of rhetoric!).

Relay is where the picture and text work in tandem to create a meaning that could not be made by each element separately; it is the result of a relaying of messages between both elements (1977b: 41). In order to analyse this I will return to the Parr photograph of the people in the garden. The title of this picture is *Conservative 'Midsummer Madness' Party*. Most of this title could be regarded as anchorage. If we believe what it says – and of course titles can be inaccurate – it tells us who these people are (Conservative supporters), what time of year the picture was taken (in the middle of summer), and what they are doing (having a party). All of this is quite matter-of-fact and functions like the caption of a press photograph in anchoring the basic facts of the photograph. However, the word 'madness', while part of the name of the event also seems to jar with the image. The ideas connoted by a 'madness' themed party suggest a wild, energetic and fun occasion. As I have suggested above, the picture seems to connote the very opposite to this. The word 'madness' therefore could be seen to work in relay here: the contradiction between the usual

connotations of the word 'madness' and the connotations of the image work together only to heighten the impression of tense conformism that the photograph conveys.

Barthes argues in 'Rhetoric of the Image' that relay is used less commonly than anchorage in relation to photographs (1977b: 40–41). However, in the decades since he made this statement, the use of text as relay has become standard practice in advertising, giving the viewer the impression of involving them more directly in the process of making meaning. For example, in the 1990s *Conservative 'Midsummer Madness' Party* was used as part of a campaign to sell Pepe jeans. The image was presented as if it was stapled to a notice board accompanied by a piece of paper with the Pepe jeans logo and the phrase 'The world is full of people you hope you'll never meet'. In this advert the text works as relay with Parr's image, playing on the subjects' expressions, gestures and formal clothes, in order to contrast them with the more relaxed, casual lifestyle of the intended consumer of Pepe jeans. In the following section the importance of context to a photograph's meanings is analysed.

FIXING MEANINGS: CONTEXTS

The act of making a photograph automatically de-contextualises what is in front of the camera and places what is photographed into new contexts. Elizabeth Edwards and Allan Sekula are two writers who have insightfully traced this process and how it affects a photograph's meanings (Edwards 1992; Sekula 1982). When a camera lens is pointed at something and the shutter opens and closes, a fragment of the world and a period of time (usually lasting for a fraction of a second) are recorded onto a digital sensor or film. A view and a moment, Edwards has noted, are therefore detached from their original context and displaced spatially and temporally (1992: 6–7). While the photograph's view does not change and the moment in the photograph does not move, the meanings of a photograph can change and move around it. A photograph, Sekula argues, presents 'the possibility of meaning' (1982: 91). These meanings are contingent on words (as we have examined above), but can also depend on other images that accompany the photograph. Just as a photograph is rarely seen without words, so too is it unusual to find a photograph in isolation.

Benjamin, writing the essay 'A Short History of Photography' from a Marxist position in the Germany of the 1930s, wanted photography to be used politically to make viewers conscious of what was going on in the country at the time, such as the poor conditions of workers in factories owned by businesses including the steel manufacturer Krupp and the electrical company AEG (Benjamin 1980). Although Benjamin sees a

photograph as a 'reflection of reality' (a phrase quoted from the playwright Bertolt Brecht), a single photograph alone would be unlikely to show what was going on in the factories (see Slater 1997a: 93–94). In one of the most widely cited statements on photography, Benjamin continues to quote Brecht who argues that, 'A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG reveals almost nothing about these institutions' (Benjamin 1980: 213). The solution, according to Benjamin, is to 'build something up', to add other elements to the single photograph. It is clear that Benjamin saw that one of way of doing this could be through the addition of text ('Will not captions become the essential component of pictures?' he asks later in the essay (1980: 215)). But another way that he suggests is via the addition of more photographs.

This idea of putting images together, based on the cinematic principal of 'montage', pioneered for the purposes of Communist propaganda in the 1920s by the Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (see Joyce 1999), creates what Barthes called the 'third meaning', often also referred to as the 'third effect' (Walker 1997). At its most basic, to montage is to assemble together two or more images, while 'photomontage' involves the combining of separate photographs into a single image (see Ades 1986; Bull 1999a; Evans and Gohl 1986). The German photo-magazines of the 1930s, which applied montage techniques, significantly influenced the use of photographs in magazines across the world as well as the 'photobooks' that became increasingly popular during the 20th century (see Chapter 6).

An entire page is dedicated to *Conservative 'Midsummer Madness' Party* in Parr's 1989 book *The Cost of Living* (the picture's first published appearance), where he turned his camera onto the British people who were successful under Thatcherism in the 1980s (Parr 1989). Printed on the opposite page, alongside the photograph's title, is a second photograph, labelled *Coffee Morning*, where another group of people at another social gathering are involved in a similarly tight-lipped conversation. Throughout the book a feeling of discomfort is created by Parr's catching of uneasy gestures and expressions and his use of a 'snapshot aesthetic' as heads are cut off, focus is lost and horizons tilted (see Chapters 5 and 6). There is an overall connotation of parody to Parr's pictures in *The Cost of Living* as his subjects are, literally, framed by the camera (which led to accusations by reviewers of stereotyping and exploitation); however, the use of individual images builds up a bigger picture that reveals – from Parr's perspective – an important aspect of British culture in the late 1980s (see Bull 1995).

A photograph's immediate context among other photographs – whether it be on a magazine, book or website page, in a photo album or in an exhibition – has a significant effect on our interpretation of it. Such

placements are all forms of montage and have the potential to create meanings across images (see also Chapter 5 on photo albums and social networking websites and Chapters 6 and 7 on photobooks). However, the influence of immediate context must be considered in relation to the wider discourses of which a photograph can become a part, as the next section examines.

FIXING MEANINGS: DISCOURSES

Discourses are notoriously tricky to define. Since the 1970s the idea of 'discourse' has complemented, absorbed and/or replaced the theory of ideology analysed earlier in this chapter (Briggs and Copley 1998: 278–280). Its use in the analysis of photographs generally originates from the writings of French philosopher Michel Foucault. Rose has summarised Foucault's definition of discourse as 'groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking' (2007: 142). All of the statements around a particular photograph or photographic practice – its discursive context – produce how it is thought about.

To illustrate this idea, it is useful to examine in detail how Parr's *Conservative 'Midsummer Madness' Party* has travelled through a number of discourses, the production of its meaning changing – sometimes subtly, sometimes significantly – in the process.

Positioned on the pages of *The Cost of Living*, *Conservative 'Midsummer Madness' Party* is part of the documentary discourse – where 'things as they are' are shown. Writers such as John Tagg would be likely to argue that the positioning of the photographs in *The Cost of Living* within the discourse of documentary produces the idea that they depict the 'reality' of middle-class consumerism in 1980s Britain (see Rose 2007: 175; Tagg 1988b). (Although Parr's work is part of a development in the discourse of documentary where the photographer presents a more personal, subjective viewpoint on their topic (see Chapter 6).)

The following year the same photograph reappeared on the front of the catalogue for the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA) exhibition of *British Photography from the Thatcher Years* (Kismaric 1990). In this discourse the photograph was still strongly connected to the middle-classes and the political situation in Britain (despite the retrospective sound of the show's title, Margaret Thatcher remained Prime Minister at the time). However, the discussion surrounding the photograph in the catalogue firmly situates both it, Parr's work in general, and that of his co-exhibitors (including John Davies, Paul Graham, Chris Killip and Graham Smith) as having revived British photography from what Susan Kismaric,

MoMA curator and author of the catalogue essay, perceives as the doldrums it had been in during the previous decades (1990: 6–10).

Kismaric positions Parr's work as pioneering colour documentary photography in Britain, but the discourse of art that surrounds the placement of the photograph in one of the world's most important galleries also begins to add much greater emphasis to the idea that the image is an example of personal expression by Parr. Even the white borders that surround the picture on the cover of *British Photography in the Thatcher Years* reinforce the removal of the photograph from its relevance to the outside world and a specific place and period of time, with the emphasis instead on isolating the image as a work of art. (In Chapter 7 I elaborate on the idea of art and personal expression.)

Parr became a full member of the Magnum photography agency in 1994. Magnum was set up in the 1940s to protect the rights of photographers in respect of how their work was used and to promote the generally humanitarian attitude of the photographers towards the subjects they photographed (see Chapter 6). While Magnum photographers had been selling their work to advertisers for decades, by the mid-1990s the organisation became far more active in promoting its photographs for commercial purposes. When *Conservative 'Midsummer Madness' Party* was used in the advertising campaign for Pepe jeans discussed above, permission was gained from the people in the photograph and payments were made to them. However, at the time Colin Jacobson expressed a concern that in the discourse of advertising the image was being used in a way that not only went against the principles upon which Magnum was established, but also reinforced the stereotypes Parr's work had been accused of exploiting in his books and exhibitions (Jacobson 2008). While Parr acknowledges the exploitation of prejudices as integral to his projects, within the commercial discourse of advertising the end result was that the garden party photograph was primarily selling jeans rather than commenting on British culture (Parr and Brittain 1999; Parr 2008).

In 2002 a retrospective exhibition of Parr's work began to tour the world. The accompanying book by the show's curator, Val Williams, placed Parr's photographs into the discourse of biography, considering them in relation to his middle-class upbringing (Williams 2002). In Parr's youth, the book tells us, he would visit his grandparents and go to Harry Ramsden's fish and chip shop – a far cry from the bird watching holidays he had with his parents. Williams relates the story of how it was in the chip shop that Parr made his first photo-essay and where he learnt that people were distracted when eating and therefore open to being photographed:

Throughout his photographic career Parr has returned to the portrayal of the British eating in public, creating a comedy of manners and social exposure. From the finger food at the Conservative party fête, to the consumption of fast food on the move, from an elderly couple staring past each other in a drab tea shop, to a crowd of raucous girls in a New Brighton chip shop, Parr has produced photographs that form a direct link to that first photo-essay at Harry Ramsden's.

(Williams 2002: 25)

Within Williams' retrospective the meaning of the garden party photograph changes again to an image that resonates with Parr's own life. It relates to the discourse of authorship, where biographical details are regarded as the primary factors in defining the meanings of a work, helping to establish food, and eating in public, as recurring themes in Parr's work as an 'author'. In Chapter 7 challenges to this idea of authorship are debated.

Conservative 'Midsummer Madness' Party is also on the Magnum website (image reference LON28888) where, like many more pictures by Parr and other Magnum photographers, it can be bought for use in publications (although the website notes that this particular image 'must not be used for any merchandising', perhaps because it has already been associated with the Pepe jeans brand). The photograph can be located on the website, not just by looking up the name 'Martin Parr', but also through searching for the following keywords:

Conversation, Drinking Glass, Eating, Exterior, Man – 45 to 60 Years, Middle Class, Party, Plate, Private Garden, Right Wing, Seated, Clothes (Suit), White People, Wine, Woman – 45 to 60 Years

As such it is part of the discourse of the 'image bank', a database of photographs that allow the picture to illustrate an extensive range of themes in countless other discourses (see Chapter 4). The Magnum website can be accessed via links from sites such as Parr's own website, placing the photograph in its digital form within a wider virtual context.

While the material qualities and physical context of photographs play a vital role in determining meanings (see Chapter 2), viewing digital photographic images in the interconnected virtual space of the web creates a 'hyper-context' for photographs online, resulting in their positioning within potentially limitless discourses (see Sassoon 2004). Fred Ritchin regards the digital photograph not as a window on the world (a definition that fits the documentary discourse) or a mirror of the photographer (the discourses of art, biography and authorship), but as a

‘mosaic’ – a fragmented image, parts of which can be hyperlinked, ‘mapped’ or ‘tagged’ and clicked on to provide other points-of-view on the picture. The web’s numerous discursive perspectives suit photography well, he argues: emphasising the interpretation of photographs as being collaborative and ‘multi-vocal’ (Ritchin 2009: 69–77).

Clearly, what a photograph means does not derive entirely from its content (although it is essential that content is analysed). By their very nature photographs are mobile signs whose meanings change across space and time and through virtual spaces too. Words, contexts and discourses all play vital roles in determining the consensus of how a photograph will be interpreted at any given moment and in any given place. The meanings of photographs are never permanently fixed.

