

Images of Ideology and the Ideology of Imagery

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REVIEW ESSAYS/ NOTES CRITIQUES

Images of Ideology and the Ideology of Imagery

Richard Oestreicher

Robert Wilkie, Don Macgillivray, Allan Sekula, and Leslie Shedden, *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the University College of Cape Breton 1983).

Guy and Candie Carawan, *Voices from the Mountains* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press 1982).

IDEOLOGY IS BUILT OUT OF SYMBOLS and images, rarely arranged in a fully coherent discourse. In the twentieth century, with the spread of cheap mechanical reproduction and instantaneous electronic transmission, these images are increasingly photographic. Photographs mould popular consciousness. Yet historians, even labour and social historians concerned with popular ideology and consciousness, are overwhelmingly oriented towards the written word. We largely ignore the visual arena which is the source of an increasing share of workers' information about ideas and events beyond their own experiences. We are only beginning to understand how modern means of transmitting images have fundamentally altered the nature of popular culture. When we do use photographs in our work, we use them primarily for illustration or for the bits of information embedded in them. We do not, for the most part, consider their larger ideological meaning and significance.

Mining Photographs and Other Pictures 1948-1968 and *Voices from the Mountains* demonstrate the ideological nature of photographs in very different ways. The first is a conscious attempt by a group of historians and photographic critics to use the work of a local photographer from a Cape Breton mining community to raise questions about photographic meaning and to attack two dominant concepts of photography which implicitly deny its ideological

R. Oestreicher, "Images of Ideology and the Ideology of Imagery," *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (Spring 1985), 179-183.

character: photography as art and photography as a slice of reality. The second, a collection of songs, interviews, and photographs put together by two activists associated with the Highlander Education Centre in Tennessee, uses photographs for an ideological purpose: to arouse readers about the oppression of Appalachian working people and the ecological impact of strip mining on their land and culture.

At first glance *Mining Photographs* resembles the coffee table books which have proliferated in the last decade. Part of a series on "Source Materials of the Contemporary Arts," it is printed on slick paper and the more than 160 full page photographic plates are preceded only by a brief introduction. But anyone who ventures to read that introduction (I suspect many purchasers may not) will quickly recognize that the resemblance is superficial. The editors make their political intentions clear by explicitly stating their commitment to "critical practice" and their belief that such practice must distinguish itself from prevailing modes of cultural criticism by

address[ing] issues that were . . . more general (the condition of mass culture) and more specific (the particular formations of ideology in the place where critical practice wants to be operative.) . . . This book . . . has two ambitions . . . to take a position against the systematic appropriation of traditional documentary photography by dominant cultural institutions . . . [so] that a body of work such as [this] is not . . . condemned to merely serve the interests of its corporate sponsors . . . [and] to provide a critical link between social history, a group of cultural forms, and the people who live that history and culture. (xxvii)

They do that in a series of essays which first describe the background of Leslie Shedden, the photographer, and explain why he was commissioned to make many of these photographs for Dosco, the community's largest employer; then compare the image of community life the corporation sought to propagate with the descriptions of other observers and historians; and finally reflect on what the contradictions between corporate vision and histor-

ical reality tell us about photographic meaning.

Leslie Shedden, according to Robert Wilkie's introduction, conceived of himself as an artisan who "did his job and did it well." (xxvi) He inherited the Shedden Studio from his father, David, a meat-cutter who came to Glace Bay on Cape Breton in 1910 and gradually turned his photographic hobby into a career, opening the studio in 1916. David Shedden was influenced by high art conceptions of aesthetic photography. Two of his submissions accepted for competitive salon exhibitions, soft focus Steichenesque bust portraits of a black vagrant and an unidentified old woman, are reproduced in the volume. Leslie took over the studio after World War II, assuming full control on his father's death in 1948.

He also took pride in his work but it was more the craftsman's pride in the job well done than the artist's pretensions to transcendent aesthetic vision. His best photographs, he felt, were the portraits he took routinely to document personal and family events. He did all the darkroom work himself, not only developing and printing but also meticulously hand colouring the portraits, resisting the use of machine-processed colour film well into the 1960s. Such preferences suggest both his intimate connections with his community and a stubborn survival of artisanal work attitudes.

But Shedden's biggest customer, the client for over half the photographs in this book, was the Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation (Dosco). Dosco used Shedden's photographs in two ways: externally for public relations; internally to spread its paternalistic managerial philosophy. The photographs appeared in annual reports, industry magazines, a local employee newsletter, *Teamwork* (with cartoon masthead of "a worker and manager pulling together for quality, safety, efficiency, quantity"), and *Dosco World*, produced in the company's Montreal office. (258) Shedden's work helped Dosco managers celebrate corporate

achievements and technical advances; it was a fundamental part of the company's systematic attempts to inculcate the values of the *Teamwork* logo.

A typical two-page spread in *Dosco World* juxtaposed six photographs of miners drilling at a coal face, company shipyards, rail terminals, quarries, and steel mills with the headline "Dosco is a Big Family," and a brief account of "amazing facts about our company that should make you proud to be associated with some 21,000 other Dosco employees." Dosco, the story explains, is steel and iron and bridges and "a host of other products . . . but above all, Dosco is people." And who are these people? Another cover photo shows four of "the 624 MacDonalds of Dosco after finishing a day's work at No. 26 Colliery in Glace Bay." The MacDonalds, like all the "Family of Dosco," are all kinds: coal miners and superintendents, English- and French-speaking. But all are MacDonalds and all are Dosco — all "God's chosen people," all one big, happy family. (xxi-xxii)

In Dosco's world mines were clean and efficient; smokestacks meant good jobs; happy employees won bowling trophies, received Mixmasters and radios at their retirement banquets, played softball, sat around the warm hearth heated with Dosco coal. In Dosco's world there were no mine disasters, no strikes, no injuries, no exhaustion. There were no memories of the three military occupations which broke strikes in the 1920s, of the elections of provincial Farmer-Labor Party representatives, of mass unemployment. In Dosco's world there was no industrial decline, no layoffs, no stagnation of the local economy, no indication that Dosco's management would disown its family and pull out in the 1960s. The Dosco world of teamwork, as the essays by Robert Wilkie, Don Macgillivray, and Allen Sekula argue, was an ideological construct.

Robert Wilkie's introduction explains the book's purpose, describes the Shedden family, and analyzes the assumptions

of *Dosco World and Teamwork*. Don Macgillivray's essay on the labour history and culture of the region provides the historical background which makes the contrast between Dosco's imagery and the community's history clear. This analysis and contrast would stand by itself as a major statement about corporate manipulation of reality, but Allan Sekula's concluding essay "Photography Between Labour and Capital" uses the work of his collaborators as a case study to address two more fundamental questions: what does this example tell us about how we should analyze and understand images and what are the ideological assumptions underlying and implicit in the act of image creation?

Sekula, a photographic historian and critic at Ohio State University, has already written important essays on the first question in which he argues that the meaning of photographs comes from context; photographic meaning is "subject to cultural definition."¹ He contrasts this argument with two alternative views of the nature of photographic truth — art and documentary — both of which, he argues, are "bourgeois folklore." Photography's claim as art rests on the assertion that exceptional individuals are capable of a vision which, in the words of one critic, captures the infinite, the underlying human unconscious which speaks to fundamental emotional longings in human beings:

There are aesthetic emotions for which there are no corresponding thoughts, emotions that awaken the Unconscious alone and that never touch the brain; emotions vague, indefinable, confused; . . . Imagination is the dream of the Unconscious. . . . It is the hasheesh of genius. Out of the dream of the artist issues all . . . beauty . . . but the roots of his imagination lie deeper than his personality. The soul of the genius is the safety-vault of the race, the treasure pocket of the Unconscious soul of the

¹ Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," *Art Forum* (January 1975), 36.

world... the product of genius overwhelms us because it has collaborated with the Infinite.²

Sekula dismisses this. What makes some photographs art, he argues, is the skill of their creators in fulfilling the expectations that viewers who are part of an intellectual-aesthetic discourse bring to the photograph. There is nothing in the photograph itself which makes it art, or makes it meaningful, to someone who is not part of that discourse, who is outside of the cultural context. Stieglitz's *Steerage* or Ansel Adams' *Moonrise Over Hernandez* would be meaningless to a Bushman or a visitor from another planet. As such, photographs are "messages," and their meaning does not come from the inherent properties of the photograph but from the social relationships between creator, subject, and viewer.

Documentary meaning is equally contextual. The "realistic" qualities of photographs tend to obscure this, but photographs are not reality but the appearance of reality *selectively chosen*, just as in art photography, to convey a message. There is thus, if we accept Sekula's argument, nothing about Shedden's *Dosco* photographs which is *uniquely* ideological.³ It is not that *Dosco* has been exceptionally manipulative in its use of images. All images are *inherently* ideological. Every image is the result of choices designed to depict reality in a particular way. What we should really object to in *Dosco World* is its message.

But Sekula does not deny that manipu-

² Benjamin de Casseres, "The Unconscious in Art," *Camera Work* (1911) as quoted in Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning."

³ Indeed, as Sekula points out, some of the *same* photographs arranged in a different context take on a different meaning. One of Shedden's photographs of miners securing roof supports next to a *Dosco*-manufactured mining machine was originally taken as a publicity photo to convey mechanization and efficiency to stockholders, but was later used as a symbol of workers' strength, dignity, and independence in the Labour Day issue of the local paper.

lation of images is a unique form of communication. Quite the contrary. The bulk of his essay is an audacious answer to his second question, the ideological assumptions underlying photographic communication. The photographic act, Sekula argues, is an attempt to capture and catalogue reality. We select bits of time and space, stop them, frame them, reproduce them, preserve them, paste them in photo albums, rearrange them in films, file them in archives. Photography represents an effort to stop time and space: it is the ultimate bourgeois reflection of the Promethean urge, the practical and psychological desire for domination and control.

Like many psychohistorical arguments this one is difficult to document in a way that will seem convincing to readers not already predisposed to accept it. Sekula tries to do so by analyzing how pictures and photographs have been used for scientific and technical purposes, especially in the development of mining. "What has it meant, historically," he asks "to seek the truth of technical processes by means of pictures?... What role has been played by scientific picture-making in the historical development of capitalism, in the construction of capitalist dominion over nature and human labor?" (203)

What follows is nearly 50 pages of vignettes analyzing works, beginning with Georgius Agricola's *De Re Metallica* (1556), the first attempt to systematically use pictures in a scientific treatise on mining, to Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, to the U.S. Geological Survey's nineteenth-century photographs of the American West, and F.W. Taylor and Frank Gilbreth's use of photography in time and motion studies in the twentieth century. Sekula has a tendency to belabour his points and emulate the jargonistic language of the bourgeois art critics he scorns. It takes patience to wade through this. I suspect many readers will lose his train of thought somewhere between Diderot and Gilbreth, but to me it was worth the effort. Sekula is asking the right

questions. Not many other photographic historians are. Readers who have not thought about these questions before will look at photographs differently after they read this book.

The same questions about the nature of photographic meaning, the use of images, and how we should analyze them, apply equally to imagery which most labour historians will instinctively find more appealing than *Dosco World*. *Voices from the Mountains* is a case in point. The voices in the songs come from songwriters like Hazel Dickens, John Prine, and Florence Reece, who wrote the classic *Which Side Are You On?* The people in the photographs and oral histories include many of the same people so movingly depicted in *Hartan County, USA*. We see and hear community activists, rank-and-file miners; we learn of the tragedy of slain union leader Jock Yablonski; we see the rape of the land. It is a compelling book.

It is also, just as *Dosco World* is, an ideological construct. In this case our convictions and sentiments may obscure that and lead us, as one reviewer quoted on the back cover does, to see "the face of the America we all really know, . . ." and to

hear "the people have their say." "The people" may be speaking here, but they are speaking and they are seen as the authors chose to have them seen.

To say that this book is also ideology is not to say it is bad, but simply to repeat what we have already said: all images are ideology. If this ideology is superior to the ideology of *Dosco World*, it is not because its images are inherently more truthful or more representative, or less manipulative, but because their message is morally superior, because we hope that the impact of that message on real people will be a positive one.

Ideology is imagery and images are all ideological. Critical analysis of images depends on the recognition that analysis must go beyond the image itself to the social relationships implicit in it. That argument should not seem like a new one to labour historians. More than a hundred years ago, Karl Marx coined the term "fetishism of commodities" in order to dramatize how preoccupation with the properties of commodities themselves obscured the social relationships of commodity production. We must look behind the surface to find the underlying relationships. We must look behind the images to find their social relationships as well.

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