

Surf and turf on Thornton Road

Steve Hanson

There are images of momentarily posed faces from Bradford working men's clubs in the 1960s, taken from the Telegraph & Argus archives. 'The clubs' were a rich scene of social history, covered by writers such as Richard Hoggart, in his influential book, *The Uses of Literacy*. Simon Ford has used these images as the starting point for a new piece of work for the Bradford Grid.

A couple of clippings exist, again from the Telegraph & Argus in the late 1960s, which cover the arrival of the blind American jazz player Roland Kirk, for a gig at the university. The matter-of-factness of these clippings cannot contain the lively sense of culture-clash, which begins right at the moment the completely blind Kirk emerges from a van in an orange boiler suit, asking cars to go around him. He then dines with the Telegraph & Argus correspondent, who feels it important to note that the waiter is thrown by his order of red meat, fish and vegetables, on the same plate. Kirk then expressed his admiration for the Coronation Street theme tune, which he considered to be a deep blues number. Of course, it is, but for the white working classes Coronation Street represented, it signified other things too, grittiness, a sense of stoicism and 'northernness', albeit reduced to a grainy surface. None of these aspects are incommensurate with 'the blues', but it is interesting to note how cultural documents can slip, and we get a sense of that in these clippings. I want to explore that sense of slippage here, and ask questions about what it means to 'know our subjects', whether we are photographers or sociologists, and the Bradford Grid is engaged in both visual representation and the exploration of social life.

Ultimately, the big question I want to address here is that of imperialism, its history and its forms of continuation. Edward Said wrote that '...the British empire integrated and fused things within it...' (1993: 4). The links between northern fabric manufacturing, empire and slavery, are widely known, but still tend to remain beneath our radar. Occasionally, we get a glimpse of this, by re-reading reports of visiting jazz legends, of course, but also in our own lives. For some of those staring out of the club pictures in the 1960s, New Orleans 'trad' jazz had been localized, occupied and to an extent neutralized as part of 'leisure', another fairly recent concept. It is interesting to imagine what the audience at the university might have made of Kirk's highly abstract performance, often playing several wind instruments simultaneously. But I think we need to place ourselves on the interior landscape of the other more, and here we might wonder what Kirk himself made of a still-industrial Bradford, which he couldn't see, not having access to the dominant and domineering sense of vision. Again, we have to engage our imagination to do this, but it would surely have provided him with the landscape of steam whistles, grey noise and atonal honking that his records sometimes drift into. Just listen to the title track from 'The Inflated Tear', an album of his from 1967.

But Kirk would have experienced these sounds in American cities too, and so there is a flattening of cultural difference in his sightlessness, taking him on to the (at that time) more universal western landscape of industrialisation. I don't think it's far-fetched to suggest that Kirk could sense, with his ears, the emerging landscape of globalization, which he took into himself and made poetry from. Some sociologists, partly sensitive to European critiques of the visual (Jay, 1994) have recently started to explore sound much more (see Back, 2009).

So, these little clippings from a local paper serve as a starting point for asking much bigger questions about places which are familiar to us, and even bigger questions about what it means to 'know' them in the first place. Richard Hoggart and his contemporaries, Raymond Williams and Edward Thompson, engaged with both this traditional landscape, and its opening-out, not least through the availability of strange recordings such as the one I have just described. But Hoggart presented a cloth-capped landscape, despite the importance of his research, and Edward Said points out (1993) that Williams's great work on the English novel misses its implications in the spaces of empire. It seems beyond obvious to say that the working men's club pictures arrive to us already-edited, as do the great English novels of the nineteenth century, but the documents in the archive have even edited out the work of editing. And here I have some personal experience:

I spent some time employed by newspapers in the 1990s, laying out pages, and once, in nearby Halifax, for the Saturday morning shift when the 'club scene' photographs would need arranging and captioning for the Saturday afternoon edition. The contact sheets sometimes contained pictures of young men and women exposing themselves or making obscene gestures. These were scored out with an oil pencil. On two separate occasions I had a phone call just before the deadline - one from a man, one from a woman - asking me to go through the pictures as they were 'with someone they shouldn't have been' the night before, but were drunk, and were photographed with them anyway. On the first occasion the picture wasn't due to run, but on the second, the person in question was rescued from exposure with quarter of an hour to go before the 11am deadline. The wider point I want to make here is this: not only do these images still present white working class culture in the name of a whole town, but the social itself is often missing from these images, it is evacuated by editing, standard poses, and by the visual itself, the most really real goggles via which we view the unreal surfaces of the past. Reality itself always arrives, to repeat a phrase, localized, occupied and to an extent neutralized.

But it isn't only different cultures which are elided, work in the city often remains unseen, in favour of images of leisure. Work is always linked to other, more global shifts too, to big money and meetings in rooms attended by the cultural elites, who again, often do not live in the towns they speak for. Because if we pull back once more, there is a bigger editing taking place here, that of the other nations Bradford was and is attached to. I am currently

undertaking research, which tries to reconnect the other, and otherness, in provincial small towns. Here are some field notes from that project:

My hosts serve rag pudding, a kind of local meat pie with suet pastry, traditionally cooked in a cloth in boiling water - hence the 'rag'. With this we have boiled potatoes and carrots, but also a plate of nan bread to share and a jar of mango chutney. The nan bread and mango chutney are served because my hosts know that I like curry, but they don't like spicy food themselves, so just the elements of a curry meal we all enjoy are included. There is a simultaneous social editing and integration here which links back, in its banality, to Edward Said's insights about imperialism. It is dialectical. I help with the washing up. As I finish drying plates I notice the Daily Express headline on the dining table we have just cleared:

'MIGRANTS FLOOD BACK TO BRITAIN - 100,000 more can claim our benefits from next week'.

Simon Ford and I both emerge in part from the work of Victor Burgin and John Tagg. Yet those bodies of visual and theoretical practice can leave one feeling enervated, and in a bleakly ironic way - unable to practice. But we can break back in here, there are strategies via which we might do this which can be learned. It is under our noses, actually, it isn't the case that reality is simply an illusion, an argument we can trace back to Kant, and forward again to Heidegger. It is just that we arrive at it - and it arrives at us - already sewn-up and coloured by culture, by our perceptions. But if we simply show the stitching, as I have attempted here, we may not even need to unpick it. Via images of ourselves staring back at us in local papers, we can appear to occupy the centre, but we do not. This isn't just a geographical question, but one regarding the construction of our selves:

'...the entire history of the concept of structure, before the rupture of which we are speaking, must be thought of as a series of substitutions of centre for centre, as a linked chain of determinations of the centre. Successively, and in a regulated fashion, the centre receives different forms or names. The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix [...] is the determination of Being as presence in all senses of this word.' (Derrida, 1978: 279).

The blasting sounds of 'The Inflated Tear' do not for one second assume any easy sense of a centre, but that glorious noise is a metaphor for some of the very big concerns and questions I have raised here, around the long history of imperialism, culture and representation itself. In the spirit of Derrida's provocations, I don't posit these questions in order to suggest that I have the answer, instead I hope for more 'substitutions of centre for centre', an opening out of our understanding of what this simultaneously global and local thing we occupy is - rather than a narrowing - at a time of very serious crisis. Similarly, the Bradford Grid often begins on familiar terrain to make it unfamiliar once more, and only in this way

can we ever even begin to 'know' it.

But I don't want to end on a point of total relativism either: Stuart Hall, on Radio 4, recently warned of the coming conservatism in this country, telling us that the powerful have always tried to appear as though they have just 'emerged from the sea' with all their enlightenment rationalism and fitness to govern already in place. This is where Derrida's difficult theory must be applied practically. If there is one definite statement to make here, it is that multiple representational practices can and must undermine such complacent assumptions, because this is how imperialism is not 'merely historical', but contemporary.

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