

A Pedagogical Discussion of Pictorial Stereotypes

*When art promotes unique
contributions to humanity*

PAUL LESTER

On my way to a photojournalism class I was teaching while a graduate student at Indiana University, I happened to pass one of my professor's offices, and casually mentioned that I was off to my class. He immediately replied in his loud, scratchy voice, "Make It Live!"

He no doubt said the phrase to challenge me. As teachers we are continually faced with the task of creating lectures with words and pictures that will make the information live for our students. For a lecture to live, it must stimulate students both intellectually and emotionally. For a lecture to have a life, the information must be remembered by the students.

Students in my large-lecture visual communications course are asked to prepare for the topic by reading the chapter in *Visual Communication Images with Messages* (Wadsworth, 1995) titled, "Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media." I also introduce the philosophy of John Rawls in his

book, *A Theory of Justice* (Belknap Press, 1971). Rawls introduced the veil of ignorance or "shoe on the other foot" philosophy in which people try to feel empathy for other humans in order to create a world in which all members of society are treated with fairness and equal respect.

The class discussion begins with a request for them to "make some noise"—to talk among themselves about instances in their lives in which they had felt discrimination. During their lively chats with each other, I go around the room and engage students who are quiet to get them talking with their classmates. After about fifteen minutes, I settle everyone down and admit the times when I felt discriminated against in my own life. I then ask to hear some of their own stories. With a class of more than 120 students, many hands are instantly raised. Stories range from African American students who describe being followed in stores to women being ignored by sales personnel in computer stores and car dealerships.

After most students get a chance to

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tell their stories, I begin a formal lecture.

The presentation allows students to understand:

- That the topic requires personal reflection and familiarity with previously published materials,
- How frequently pictorial stereotypes are in the media,
 - How diverse their own class is,
 - That diversity is much more than ethnicity,
 - That there are positive alternatives to stereotypical images, and
 - How thoughtful word, picture, and musical selections can be used to make a powerful message.

Here is an excerpt of the lecture I make before I show the slide presentation:

"I hope you haven't assumed by the title of today's topic that I'm here to bash the media. The media create stereotypes because we stereotype people. Since our brains naturally classify what we see, we can't help but notice the differences in physical attributes between one person and another. But it is not natural to create stereotypes. As with the printing term from which the word comes, to stereotype is a short-hand way to describe a person with collective, rather than unique characteristics. History has shown that stereotyping leads to scapegoating, which leads to discrimination and segregation, which leads to physical abuse and state-sponsored genocide.

"Because visual messages are products of our sense of sight, pictures are highly emotional objects that have long-lasting staying power within the grayest regions of our brain. Media messages that stereotype individuals by their concentrations, frequencies, and omissions become a part of our long-term memory. The media typically portray members of diverse cultural groups within specific content categories—usually crime, entertainment, and sports—and almost

never within general interest, business, education, health, and religious content categories. And when we only see pictures of criminals, entertainers, and sports heroes, we forget that the vast majority of people—regardless of their particular cultural heritage—have the same hopes and fears as you or me.

"In the *Images that Injure* book, there are essays concerning the cultural images of Native Americans, Africans, Mexicans, Pacific Islanders, Arabs, Anglos, Jewish persons, women, men, children, older adults, the physically disabled, blind persons, large persons, gay and lesbian persons, teachers, politicians, lawyers, police officers, religious followers, media personnel, and media victims. Chances are, the mental image you have of a member of one of those cultural groups is one that is mediated—it comes from either print, television, motion pictures, or computers.

"Most media experts come up with several reasons why the media create stereotypes:

- Advertisers that demand quickly interpreted shortcut pictures,
- Lazy or highly pressured reporters who don't take the time to explore issues within their multifaceted and complex contexts,
- Few members of diverse cultural groups work as photographers, reporters, editors, or publishers in an organization,
- The presumed, conditioned expectations of readers and viewers to accept only images of diverse members within a limited range of content categories, and
- **Culturism:** the belief that one cultural group—whether based on ethnicity, economics, education, etc.—is somehow better or worse than some other cultural group. Culturism may explain why mainstream media are slow to cover human catastrophes in remote sections of the world such as in Rwanda, Somalia, and South-Central, Los Angeles.

"But once again I remind you—and myself—that we see stereotypes in the media because we stereotype in our society. And you know this is true. There are signals, warning signs, and obvious examples everywhere we turn:

- Next time you're in a public restroom, notice the disabled persons' stall. Have you ever seen someone in a wheelchair using that toilet? Something is wrong.

- Next time you're sitting in your seat on an airplane, notice that almost always the flight attendants are women while the voice welcoming you to 35,000 feet is a man's. Something is wrong.

- Next time you're watching a video presentation that features a child at home alone successfully defending himself against two, large burglars, notice how easy it all is for the boy. Something is wrong.

- The next time you're watching a basketball game, notice how often all the players on the court are African American while all the fans in the stands are screaming Anglos. Something is wrong.

"If you're not willing to change what you know is true in society, there is little chance of there ever being a change in media images. The media provide a message and that message is that the media is you and me."

The slide presentation begins with *one in a series of three images I made of a man sitting on the steps of city hall in downtown Dallas during a protest rally. The other two images of the gentleman come at the beginning of the "Images that Heal" section and at the end of the presentation.*

I introduce the slide presentation with:

"This is one of the first photographs I ever made. And although I never spoke to this man, never learned his name, and only spent 1/500th of a second with him, he has taught me, over the years, more about myself, about photography, and

about people than many educators, friends, and family members I have known my entire life. "One lesson is—don't jump to conclusions. Resist your automatic, brain-commanded categories. Wait. Be patient. Have the courage to trust. There may be other tiny moments to see of a person's life that reveal larger truths.

"And now I want to show a collection of images that do and do not stereotype. The pictures at the end of the following presentation come from a section of *Images that Injure* titled "Images that Heal."

The slide show

The slide show consists of 80 slides that fill a tray—stereotypical and non-stereotypical images are roughly divided by half. The images come from magazines, newspapers, and photography books. The presentation has about a 50/50 split between advertising and editorial images.

Instructors can easily collect images for their own class presentations. You might find it useful to have your students bring in pictures as a class project. Have them write a two-page reaction to each photograph and engage the students in group discussions.

I include music with the slide presentation because it helps reinforce the message of the images. The "Images that Injure" section includes the musical selection by Enya titled, "Boadicea," which is a somber, instrumental work that invokes a serious mood. The "Images that Heal" section of the presentation includes Joan Osborne's recent hit, "One of Us," an optimistic anthem for understanding the unique qualities in every person.

At the conclusion of the slide presentation, I slowly advance the slide projector and pause at an image whenever a student has a comment or question about a particular picture. Many



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL LESTER

WHAT IS THE SUBJECT of this photograph? Is it a portrait (above) of a homeless man resting on the steps of a downtown city building? A quick, stereotypical view might lead to that false conclusion. ANOTHER MOMENT captured by the camera (right) reveals that he holds a rope-laced Christian Symbol he wears around his neck. This portrait now shows a man with a great deal of pride and confidence during a protest rally at city hall in downtown Dallas. Do cameras lie? No, cameras are machines incapable of lying. But photographers lie when they only show one, easily mistaken view of a person's life.





THIS RUNNER SHOWS great intensity as he starts a race. But this sports picture (left) reveals little about the man behind the concentrated gaze. Sports action images of athletes give the impression that they have no life beyond the arena. Feature pictures can reveal the multifaceted life of individuals and break long-held stereotypical views. A YOUNG WOMAN gunned down in Los Angeles (below) during a drive-by shooting sits in the chair she must use for the rest of her life. Her mother looks on with concern. But the woman is a vibrant, out-going, and optimistic individual with a dream of becoming a model. She simply happened to briefly to look down.



times students and audience members give thoughtful reactions to individual images that cause all of us to explore why certain images harm and others heal.

I conclude my lecture with these tips for avoiding pictures that stereotype:

- Show members of diverse cultural groups in everyday life situations,
- Have the courage to explore in words and pictures the underlying social problems at the heart of a violent act,
- Establish national competitions that foster positive portrayals of members from diverse cultural groups,
- Advocate more space and time in print, broadcast, and computer media to publish long-term photojournalism projects that set a more fully explained context for the single images we usually see,
- Learn all you can about visual literacy so you can really look at the images in newspapers, magazines, and on your local television news show, and
- Take the time to study the snapshots of your family and friends and the

images printed, broadcast, and downloaded, and question yourself and all who will listen about the meaning and ethics of the images we make and see.

At the end of the presentation, students spontaneously erupt into applause. In all my years of teaching, such an occurrence has never before happened.

The teaching of pictorial stereotyping is vital because it can result in harmful generalizations that deny an individual's unique contribution to humanity. And in this world of fast-food, ATM machines, cable television and World Wide Web shopping, and increasing mass media dependence, personal experiences with members from diverse cultural groups are decreasing. Although combining words, pictures, and music is a time-consuming task for hurried instructors, the instructional goals for such a communications strategy are numerous.

It is my students' reaction and positive feedback after the class that tell me that indeed, I do "Make It Live!" □

TWO GIRLS ENJOY their ride on a New Orleans streetcar. It is vital that readers, photographers, and editors seek everyday images of people from various cultural groups that show how similar we all are.



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