

"Magnum Photos which was founded by Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, George Rodger and others to set new photo-journalistic standards, has recently allowed several of its pictures to be used in advertisements. Colin Jacobson argues that this threatens the agency's original values and sets a dangerous precedent."

Strange things are happening in the world of contemporary photojournalism. As less and less reportage photography is published in magazines and books, it is generally accepted that photojournalism is in crisis. At the same time, the advertising industry finds documentary images increasingly attractive. Sebastiao Salgado, perhaps the most celebrated photojournalist of our time, has been commissioned to take pictures for car and cigarette advertisements. Also, a campaign for Hugo Boss recently used three established British photographers working in the black and white documentary tradition.

Like many other picture agencies, Magnum, the world famous photography cooperative, has recognized this lucrative market place. Liz Grogan, head of commercial sales at Magnum's London office, denies that this is anything new, and points out that Elliot Erwitt, famous for his humorous work, was selling images to advertisers 30 years ago.

Magnum is renowned for its humanitarian objectives. Its name is synonymous with honesty and integrity. It was founded almost 50 years ago, on the basis that a photographer's individual responsibility was paramount, as was respect for the subjects photographed. Recent examples of reportage advertising involving Magnum photographs demonstrate the difficulties raised

when editorial images are re-used in an entirely new, and commercial, context. The advertisements for Pepe jeans and Fiat finance, use photographs by Martin Parr, a relatively recent Magnum member. They constitute deliberate secondary use of images removed from their original purpose and setting, accompanied by captions which are knowingly insulting to the individuals depicted.

Liz Grogan defends the situation: "Where we can, we try the individuals concerned [in the photograph], although often leave that to the advertising agency. Parr concurs: "I find out what the advertisement is for , seek to track down the people in the photo, offer them a payment. It's their decision." In the case of the Fiat advertisement, where the individuals could not be traced, Magnum asked the agency to put aside money in case they should come forward.

The people featured in the Pepe advert gave their permission, and received payment, but does this absolve Magnum from their responsibility for allowing the photographs to be used in this way? What is at stake is not just the nature of the advertising, or even how editorial photographers and their agents view this rich market for their work. There is a more fundamental matter, which goes to the heart of the vulnerable and delicate relationships which photographers have with the people they photograph.

In the case of Martin Parr, the debate takes on added significance, because he is a documentary photographer well known by the general public in Britain, and very famous abroad. His stylistic approach has been widely imitated by contemporary photographers, and is generally perceived to represent a rejection of the black and white documentary tradition passed down by magazines such as Picture Post and Life. His work has been constantly published in leading magazines throughout the 1980's and 90's. He has been featured several times on British TV and being promoted overseas by the British council. He recently had two exhibitions running concurrently at major venues in France.

In an interview which Parr gave to the British Journal of Photography in 1993, he said: "I use prejudice as a starting point. I then build a body of work on the prejudice associated with that subject. By subverting a subject I invite people to exercise their prejudice... I take pictures of what I feel needs to be photographed; I am exploring my own intuitive sense of what I find interesting. When you do that, many issues may evolve, but it is not my role to resolve them." We may legitimately ask, in the case of advertisements, whose role is it, then?

Grogan makes her position clear: "I always check with the photographer about any specific usage, but Magnum has no overall policy on advertising. It is up to the photographer to agree or refuse." Martin Parr: "I judge each image on its merits, but it is difficult to pin down what is legitimate and what is not. There are no set ground rules." He acknowledges that the Pepe adverts were borderline cases, but: "The people in the pictures were told about the captions, and it was up to them to agree or refuse." It is worth recalling that many Magnum archive prints bear a stamp on the reverse requiring users to respect the integrity of the image and the spirit of the captions.

The picture in the first two Pepe ads was originally part of a large project on the British middle classes. It shows a Conservative Party summer fête. Using Parr's yardstick, what prejudice are we being invited to exercise here? Do we laugh at the odd way in which these people stand, or dress, or look? Or do we delve further into the value-systems we attribute to these individuals? Surely, they are mealy-mouthed, narrow-minded little-Englanders? But we are all uneasy facing a camera, and specially one suddenly thrust at you like an offensive weapon. (Parr on his working methods: "I go in very close to people because it's the only way you can get the picture. You go right up to them. Even now, I don't find it easy. I pretend to be focussing elsewhere... I don't try and hide what I'm doing - that would be folly" BJP, 1989.)

The fact is, neither we nor Parr know anything about these individuals, other than they were attending a Tory garden party. They are, therefore, being used as props in a photographic sideshow; the pictures invite us to throw sponges at the cardboard cut-outs. It would be disconcerting for Parr if he were to discover that these individuals were actually rather kind and caring, and did not believe that criminals should be flogged in public. As a photographer, he cannot afford to know anything about them as people, because this would upset his attitudinal apple cart. (The second Pepe ad featuring a man on a lawnmower reads: "Cut this out and stick it up your arse.")

So, three people at a particular summer fete in Bath, end up in an advert for trendy jeans with a derogatory copy line: "The world is full of people you hope you'll never meet." The advertiser's technique is more overt than Parr's own; these gruesome people wouldn't be seen dead with these people. Have the "Creatives" at the advertising agency fallen into Parr's prejudicial trap, assuming that the picture was originally taken as a form of cultural subversion? Or have they recognized that in Parr's work, human beings are just symbols being used to sustain and reinforce a predetermined set of values and attitudes? In that case, photographs taken in one specific situation can be used in any other. As Parr himself said: "Anyone can be made to look like an idiot. I am aware at times what an idiot I would look photographed."

Photographer David Hurn, a member of Magnum for years, ponders on this matter: "There is nothing wrong as such with a photograph being used out of context. Prints get sold these days for a lot of money, and many famous photographers exhibit work which was originally taken for editorial reproduction." When it comes to advertising, however, Hurn believes it is more difficult. "If an editorial photograph is being used to sell a product, I am more concerned about its tone, Is it vulgar, or not? Is it decent and honest? Photographers have no right to abuse other human beings."

Another advert creates real problems for the value system which Magnum represents. It was taken in the early 1980s as part of an extended photographic essay on new Brighton, a working-class holiday resort close to Merseyside. It was, therefore, a caught moment, and perfectly legitimate. But such is the power of modern iconography, that the image subsequently appeared in a much later body of Parr's work entitled *Bored Couples*, a series of photographs chosen by him to illustrate the thesis that in many modern marriages or relationships, individuals are bored with each other. Here we have a triple-whammy. A picture taken in one reportage context over a decade ago has been extracted and given a new and secondary meaning in a very different visual setting. And now, Parr has allowed it to be published a third time in a commercial context with a deliberately pejorative caption: "No interest for two years."

Magnum were unable to trace the two people involved, but nevertheless gave permission for the photograph to be used. There's a strong possibility that the relatives of the man and woman are still alive. It doesn't take much imagination to guess how they would feel seeing the way a casual image of members of their family, taken at the seaside long ago, has been used in an equally casual way, with an extremely insulting inference to sell finance for Fiats. Once again, the message is clear; particular individuals are uninteresting and unimportant in their own right. They are merely types or caricatures, captured in a vulturistic manner to convey a set of social and cultural attitudes and reinforce the photographer's view of the world. Neither we nor Martin Parr have any idea whether this couple really are bored with each other, indeed we don't even know for certain that they are a couple. They may be brother and sister, or even strangers. The photographer shows an uncaring arrogance in his assumption that they have nothing to say each other, and it fits his purpose to stick to this, if not through thick and thin, the through a book and a financially rewarding advertisement. In the USA, the family of this 'couple' would surely take Magnum and Parr to the cleaners, and who could blame them? However as Liz Grogan points out, Magnum, like most other agencies, would not accept responsibility. "In any commercial exploitation of Magnum pictures, the user takes responsibility for any legal come-back. The advertising agency signs an indemnification clause against any litigation."

Martin Parr has been hailed as an extraordinary talent, indeed the dazzling talent of his generation. In the '80s, he seemed to be showing us the unfortunate victims of an awful society, in which greed was worshipped. But far from exposing this malaise, these advertisements make it clear that Parr is part of it. By allowing his work to appear in this way, knowing what the captions would say, and aware that the subjects of the pictures would be paid, Parr is

inextricably involved in the very sickness it was said he was trying to reveal. He is part of problem and not of the solution. Perhaps he was just sneering all along.

David Hurn provides the final word on the implications of Parr's decision to agree to these advertisements: "I squirm for the memory of George Rodger (a founding father of Magnum who died last summer). Martin represents the genre of anarchic irreverence for everything, and he is perfectly in tune with his times. Is this way Magnum want to go? ·

Martin Parr's Small World is at Portfolio Gallery, Edinburgh (0131-220-1911) from July 5 to August 1

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Magnum Farce

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<http://www.zonezero.com/magazine/articles/jacobson/magnum1.html>