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Author(s): Paul Grainge

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TIME's Past in the Present: Nostalgia and the Black and White Image

PAUL GRAINGE

I

In 1995, the Hubble Space Telescope sent back to astronomers at the University of Arizona a series of vivid colour images of the Eagle Nebula, a dense formation of interstellar gas and dust the likes of which cradle newborn stars. As evidence that our perceptual universe, in every sense of the word, is defined by the representational powers of colour technology, the Hubble's "cosmic close-ups" are a clear case in point. Colour has become a standard representational form and hence the visual form. If so, what can be said of the recent popularity and proliferation of the black-and-white image?

No self-respecting café-bar or discriminating home, it seems, can now do without a black and white print on the wall. Commercial photography and certain forms of advertising have found a new niche in black and white, and even sepia is staging a come-back. The popularity of the black-and-white image cannot be divorced from the commercial culture in which it circulates; it is a "look" and a marker of taste. Monochrome is a stylistic trend but a revealing one, especially if one considers the growing preoccupation in America with heritage and memory. Both Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes give black and white a status of authenticity judged in relation to past time "properly" captured. For Sontag, monochrome gives an image a sense of age, historical distance, and aura. She writes, "the cold intimacy of color seems to seal off the photograph from patina." Likewise, Barthes comments on the artifice of colour, how it is a "coating applied later on to the original truth of black

Paul Grainge is a doctoral student in the School of American and Canadian Studies, University of Nottingham, NG7 2RD.

and white.”¹ For both critics, monochrome is an aesthetic of the authentic figured around a basic quality of pastness.

I want to consider the currency of the black-and-white image in *Time* magazine. In a culture that has become disposed in various ways to the “authentic past” and its representational idioms, monochrome has become in *Time* the signature of (historical) authenticity and in certain cases nostalgia for the present.² My theoretical concern is the means by which black and white can give the present a temporal aura. If pastness pervades the visuality of black and white, it has the capacity to convey the present *as* a past, complete with a sense of narrativized historical form. To the broader question of why a society requires certain images at particular times, the answer for black and white can perhaps be found in its basic capacity to arrest a sense of meaning, historical and otherwise: to stimulate slowness in a climate of speed, to evoke time in a culture of space, to suggest authenticity in a world of simulation and pastiche. In a culture frenetically overproducing (colour) images, black and white punctuates the norms of visual reception. One could say that black and white’s authenticity is based on the interruption it provides to constant and numbing colour stimuli. While black and white is linked to the image-governed world of postmodernity, it somehow seems set apart. It is an aesthetic born of the past and distinguishable from the dominant field of colour representation. Roger Rosenblatt says that the striking thing about black and white is that “it probes the inner life of things.”³ Monochrome provides visual substance, or rather the sense (or simulation) of substance, in a postmodern world commonly described as depthless.

While some may argue that any image – colour *or* black and white – simply adds to the pervasive saturation of visual stimuli in cultural life, this does not account for the more discriminate meanings that different types of image wield in specific, institutional, contexts. When the visual pastness of monochrome in *Time* magazine combines with a powerful journalistic impulse to make sense of the world, black and white helps

¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979), 71; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 1993), 81.

² My use of the term “nostalgia for the present” differs from that of Fredric Jameson. For Jameson, the “nostalgia mode” is a representational economy that has emerged as a symptom of a crisis in the postmodern historical imagination. I focus upon the aestheticization of nostalgia in particular stylistic forms, examining the cultural and memory work performed in the negotiation (rather than negation) of historical meaning.

³ Roger Rosenblatt, “Prologue: In Black and White,” in P. F. Bentley, ed., *Clinton: Portrait of Victory* (New York: Warner Books, 1993), 10.

configure subjects with a certain depth of historical meaning. There is a politics of representation here. Black and white helps construct narratives that give issues and events the distance and authority of time; it has the potential for legitimization, giving archival aura to people and politics, cultures and corporations. Monochrome, especially when applied to the present, can function as an agent of visual historicism. My emphasis is less to extrapolate the fine details of what political interest black and white might serve when used in particular images, than to outline its more general use in *Time* within a signifying regime. In identifying a politics of representation, I want to focus more on the how than the why.

II

There has been an interesting reversal in *Time* magazine in the last few years. Once, technological and economic necessity meant that *Time* was entirely black and white apart from its cover, a selection of advertisements, and those stories deemed “special.” Now that the magazine is in full colour (the domestic issue since 1985, the international issue since 1989), the only parts in black and white are, significantly, a selection of advertisements and those stories deemed “special.” There has been a transfer of visual signification. If colour was at one time the carrier of impact and meaning, black and white has usurped this role. Of course, black and white has impact because it is the contrast from the norm, a quality that colour once enjoyed. Its currency in *Time* and *Newsweek* has grown steadily during the 1990s, however, to the extent that it is now a visual commonplace. This stylistic renaissance must be understood in relation to strategic factors within magazine publishing such as *Time's* redesign in 1992, but it can also be measured in terms of its signifying capital and political functionality. Black and white gives a picture status beyond that of being “news”; it suggests that an image has cultural significance in the broad construction of historical identity. If colour reports, monochrome chronicles.

The picture editor of *Time Atlantic*, Paul Durrant, believes that black and white became popular in news magazines in 1992 when *Newsweek* ran a story on Sarajevo using black and white photographs by Tom Stoddard.⁴ It was P. F. Bentley's portraits of Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign that helped pioneer its recent use in *Time*. In each case,

⁴ Paul Durrant, telephone interview, 25 Mar. 1997.

monochrome was a response to the saturation of colour in a broad magazine market where investments in new technologies of engraving and digital image reproduction had, since the late 1980s, enabled high-quality full-colour formats.

There is no formal policy concerning the use of black and white in *Time*. It is not a question of black and white being cheaper to print for it is actually processed in colour to achieve better resolution. Monochrome has become a staple in news magazines based on visual connotation. What makes this interesting from a cultural perspective is the pattern of its stylistic deployment. Since 1992, black and white has been used to represent, among many stories, the Bosnian war, the American budget, the state of perestroika in Russia, reflections on the Holocaust, the financial bailout of Apple by Microsoft, the legacy of the Vietnam War, the blossoming of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, and the rise of the Christian coalition. The seminal moments in America's political calendar are now frequently shot in black and white. The question that must be asked is what, if anything, unites them all? What status are these stories given by their monochrome representation?

Michele Stephenson, picture editor for the domestic issue of *Time*, states that black and white is used for a documentary effect.⁵ While breaking news will almost certainly be shot in colour, black-and-white images are used to give a story qualities of introspection and poignancy. She says that, while there are no subjects that lend themselves inherently to black and white, there are certain moods that can be evoked by its use. These include a sense of unobtrusiveness and of being "behind the scenes," but also a sense of archival retrospection. Henry Luce, founder of *Time*, said that "everything in *Time* should be titillating, or epic or supercurtly factual."⁶ As a visual idiom, black and white leans towards an epic factuality – *monochrome documents and chronicles*. Stories in black and white are visually codified in a way that provides them with historical significance. Victor Burgin suggests that the news photograph helps transform the raw continuum of history into the product of news. With black and white, we might reverse the terms: the monochrome photograph helps transform the raw continuum of news flux into the product of history.⁷

This can be observed in two consecutive cover shots carrying images

⁵ Michele Stephenson, telephone interview, 24 Mar. 1997.

⁶ Cited in Lance Morrow, "The Time of Our Lives," *Time*, 9 Mar. 1998, p. 27.

⁷ Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photographs," in Burgin, ed., *Thinking Photography* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 144.

of Diana, Princess of Wales, in the weeks following her fatal car accident.⁸ They are different pictures but very similar in being close-up portraits of her face and shoulders. The first is a colour image of a smiling Princess at a formal occasion (8 September 1997). One's attention is drawn to her striking blue eyes, perfect teeth, and her dangling diamond ear-rings, but also to the words "Special Report" written boldly at the top of the page. This is breaking news. The cover of the next issue has a black and white portrait of Diana, soft-focus and taken in a studio as a fashion portrait (15 September 1997). Although clearly staged, it conveys a more "private" figure than the colour photograph that shows her smiling openly for crowds and paparazzi.

It is unusual for *Time* to use successive covers so similar in style, but the issues are sold in different ways. While the first is a "special report," the second has the more discreet "commemorative issue" written inside the word TIME. A character of remembrance is established, brought out within the magazine where the death of Mother Theresa is also covered in black and white. There is perhaps nothing surprising in this, as Mother Theresa was often portrayed as someone beyond simple news; her entire life was chronicled as one moving assuredly towards canonization. Mother Theresa, in life but most certainly in death, was an icon ripe for an aesthetic of gravitas. For a news magazine, the coincidence of both women dying in the same year gave rich texture for journalistic meditations on youth and age, beauty and wisdom, "civic sainthood and the genuine article." The commemorative issue was reflective, poignant, and, as a consequence, unsurprisingly liberal in its use of black and white. It became the best-selling issue in the magazine's entire history, selling 1,183,758 copies.

Monochrome is expedient in this example for it enacts a visual sense of remembrance. Broader notions of cultural memory underpin the use of black and white on a more general level. Marita Sturken writes that "cultural memory is a means through which definitions of the nation and 'Americanness' are simultaneously established, questioned and

⁸ All the images I discuss in this article will be *Time* covers. These are significant not simply because they announce the issue at hand, but also because very few covers ever appear in monochrome. When black and white *is* used therefore, it can be indicative of the signifying regime that monochrome operates within. A more detailed analysis would have to consider the relation between monochrome covers and the visual narratives inside the magazine. It is possible to get a sense of the signifying regime I want to outline simply from the covers, however. All of my references are to *Time* Atlantic. Everything that appears in the international edition also appears in the domestic edition. While there may be some differences in content, style, and layout, I do not take these to interfere with my treatment of black and white.

refigured.”⁹ Black-and-white images of American life perhaps contribute to this negotiation of nation and “Americanness” by documenting issues and events in narratives of historical memory. If past events gain meaning by their existence in history, one could also say that present events are giving meaning by their identification *as* history. Black and white is instrumental in creating a sense of archival, thus meaningful, historical record.

This can function in several ways. In certain images, monochrome situates an issue or event as a constituent part of American historical development. In black and white, controversial stories can be framed in a visual idiom that imply that they are part of an unwinding historical narrative. Not therefore *so* controversial that they become in fact contrapuntal to national unity. One might consider a monochrome cover about race relations shortly after the Los Angeles riots in 1992. While the riots were first reported using a cover issue in colour, showing police officers running in formation towards a blazing fire, the cover of the following week’s issue appeared in monochrome with the headline, “The Two Americas: E Pluribus Unum?” (18 May 1992). Showing a young black male sitting thoughtfully under the Statue of Liberty, the image questions the value of America’s pre-eminent symbol of freedom and equality. Although the *Time* cover may query “E Pluribus Unum,” the cover works visually to authenticate the issue of race relations in broad historical terms.

The feature itself is a pointed cultural essay, not breaking news, explaining why monochrome may have been preferred. It is insufficient to suggest that monochrome *only* signifies the journalistic approach to a subject, however, of whether it is news or comment. The concept of chronicle in black and white constructs a more political meaning. By moving from news (colour) to chronicle (monochrome), the riots quickly become an event to be remembered, a cautionary explosion, a lesson to be learned. Monochrome gives post-riot race relations a stabilizing historical dimension, helping to counter the language of anarchy and social breakdown that first accompanied volcanic eruptions of racial discontent.

A different function of black and white is in the creation of nostalgia for the present. Sometimes, according to the way that *Time* presents a feature story and the discursive matrix that surrounds a subject matter, a monochrome picture may help construct the present as a future memory *being lived*, as an authentic past *in creation*. I would understand many of

⁹ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1997), 13.

P. F. Bentley's images in this way. When interviewed about the images he took of the 1992 Clinton campaign, Bentley said, "first and foremost when you're taking photos for history, black and white is archival. Color is not and deteriorates over time. I would like these images to be seen long after we are both dead so there is a record of what happened during this era."¹⁰ If news magazines have an ideological function in helping to explain the meaning of a country to itself, black and white conveys the present with an immediate sense of historical relevance and weight. This need is especially marked in a world that experiences such a fast turnover of images, stories, and news events in its visual media that it has become increasingly hard to elicit the "significance" of any one in particular.

Nostalgia for the present is an express configuration of memory, chronicle, and cultural meaning, a feeling of the workings of time for events that have yet to unfold. As an experience of time, it moves backwards to the past and forwards to the future in a simultaneous gesture, grasping the present as a cogent period with historical form. Essentially, the present is understood in terms of it being a future past; it is given the wholeness and aura that retrospection and the passage of time can provide *before* the passage of time has actually taken place. The nostalgia in question is not one of melancholy yearning but anticipatory longing; we look forward to the future in order to look back on the present being lived, complete with shape and a sense of its archival place in historical narrative. Flaubert believed that pleasure is found first in anticipation, later in memory. Nostalgia for the present finds the two collapsing so that pleasure is to be found in the very anticipation of memory.

The cover shot that accompanies Bentley's photographic essay of the Clinton campaign illustrates a certain nostalgia for the political present (2 November 1992). It has two modes of authenticity. Firstly, it emphasises the "inside story." The monochrome cover-shot is taken upwards of Clinton's face and shoulders as he speaks to someone outside the frame. It is not a conventional press image. It is documentary in style and is accompanied by the caption: "Bill Clinton's Long March: The inside story of the making of his campaign for the presidency. Will he prevail?" The cover promises personal and political authenticity captured in a milieu known for its pursuit of controlled photogenia and the carefully managed photo opportunity. Without digressing too far into photographic theory, some would say that, irrespective of content, black and

¹⁰ P. F. Bentley, e-mail interview, 28 Apr. 1997.

white is less forthright in declaring itself as a composed image. Bentley himself remarks on the authenticity of black and white by saying that, “when you see a black and white photograph you are drawn only to its contents – there is nothing to *hide behind*”¹¹ (my italics). Whether or not black and white *is* stylistically more authentic than products of the colour flash culture, composition and the textual anchoring of captions secure the overall effect.

The second mark of authenticity is historical in orientation. The cover is not simply about Clinton the man but the man’s potential influence on American history, his so-called “long march.” To understand any image, one must relate it to a series of intersecting discourses that produce meaning. Bentley’s monochrome shots should be understood in the context of the nostalgia which defined Clinton’s very campaign, from the bus trip across the Mid West to the dissemination of the photo of a young Clinton shaking the hand of President Kennedy. Clinton’s candidacy was based partly on the question of his political authenticity, as to whether he could return the zest to American life once achieved by, or remembered in, Kennedy. “For years,” wrote Lance Morrow in *Time*, “Americans have been in a vague mourning for something they sensed they had lost somewhere.”¹² Nostalgia was an expedient mode for Clinton and this perhaps made the use of black and white more appropriate for P. F. Bentley. He explains that he based his images on those taken of Kennedy in the early sixties by Jacques Lowe. By using black and white, Bentley made the 1992 election immediately archival; it conveyed the here and now as history that could one day be remembered itself as perhaps an authentic beginning of a new golden age.

The relationship between monochrome and historical authenticity in *Time* is not exclusive to particular historical personalities or to major historical themes. A black-and-white cover depicting the man at the helm of Apple computers, Steve Jobs, talking on the phone with Bill Gates of Microsoft, illustrates the deemed cultural significance of a financial deal between the two companies (18 August 1997). There is a sense of documentary and the inside story. The text on the cover includes the caption, “Exclusive: Inside the Apple–Microsoft Deal.” The deal involves the financial bailout of struggling Apple by the much stronger Microsoft. The larger historical meaning is brought out on the cover by a quotation from Steve Jobs which reads: “Bill, thank you. The world’s a better place.”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lance Morrow, “Man of the Year: The Torch is Passed,” *Time*, 4 Jan. 1992, p. 27.

The larger discourse of cyberspace in American culture is significant if one is to appreciate why *Time* may have chosen monochrome as a suitable aesthetic for an otherwise mundane business deal. *Time* has developed a particular, even rather devotional, interest in things cyber. There are several reasons that explain this. While electronic journalism, and the technologies that make it possible, have become linked to the very future of *Time* as a print magazine, cyberspace has generated questions about national, as well as media, identity. Computer technology has been largely pioneered in America, it has defined the language of the Internet as American, and it has produced one of the richest entrepreneurs in the world in Bill Gates. Cyberspace has become a new locus for American dreams and nightmares. Computers are not simply a burgeoning industry; they constitute a technology that has been discussed in cultural terms that range from utopianism (global villages and electronic democracies) to apocalypse (virus terrorism and Y2K anxiety). The discourse of cyberspace is linked to questions of national destiny, America leading the way in realizing the promise of microtechnology or suffering from its worst excesses. The function of black and white is in giving the business deal between Apple and Microsoft a measure of historical pertinence, the conciliation of old corporate foes, and a new accent on developing technological prospects.

Nostalgia for the present, as I have defined it, develops in relation to other discursive realms that construct specific issues or events as history in the making. *Time* is informed by these discursive realms but works to inform them, too. The visual differentiation between chronicle and report is the platform for editorial decisions about cultural meaning, about the subjects which should be framed as more than reported news. Clinton's 1992 election and, more recently, the business deal between Apple and Microsoft, are the two examples I have considered which convey a sense of "memorable" history. Understood in terms of discursive formations that associate Clinton and computers with historical gravitas, black and white is able to convey a basic nostalgia for the present, a sense of history being lived, of a memorable past in creation.

How can we summarize the currency of black and white in *Time*? One view might see the use of black and white as a pure simulation of authenticity, the mark of a culture grasping for a sense of significance and history denied by the rapid pace of change in late capitalist society. Pierre Nora talks of modern culture's hyperrealization of the past due to definitive estrangement from it. He writes that "modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely upon the materiality of the trace, the

immediacy of the recording, *the visibility of the image*¹³ (my italics). The indiscriminate production of archives is, he goes on to say, an expression of “the terrorism of historicized memory.” Perhaps black and white contributes to this archival imperative, the need to create a sense of memory in the face of uncertainty in the present and the breakdown of memorial consciousness. Pursuing his theory that “our society is torn from its memory by the scale of its transformations but all the more obsessed with understanding itself historically,” Nora might see the use of black and white in *Time* as an example of the proliferation of attempts by the media to create nonevents as “anticipated commemorations of themselves.”¹⁴

While provocative, Nora underestimates the cultural work performed by representational modes. He laments the passing of “true” or “spontaneous” memory, replaced by its contemporary inscription in sites, or *lieux de memoire*. Black and white, in this scheme, would be an example of the “prosthesis memory” that Nora ascribes to an anxious and amnesiac modern culture. Through its visual coding of chronicle, however, monochrome is not simply a scaffold or memorial prop, but a visual agent for particular, hegemonic formations of cultural identity. In a full-colour magazine like *Time*, black and white can arrest the gaze and inscribe an image with qualities that set it apart from colour. These qualities emerge through a basic punctuation of the visual norm, engaging a constellation of themes orbiting a concept of temporal authenticity: memory, gravitas, the archive, nostalgia. A. Robert Lee writes that in America the camera has always offered “a quick visual fix appropriate to a nation doing its historic business at high speed.”¹⁵ In a culture of rapid and profligate image making, black and white visually marks that which should be *considered* historic business. Monochrome has become a legitimating signature of historical authenticity and in certain cases nostalgia for the present.

¹³ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations*, 26 (Spring 1989), 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22. Nora’s theory is applied specifically to France, but his distinction between “sites of memory” and “environments of memory” has been applied to other cultural, in particular American, paradigms. See Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally, eds, *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ A. Robert Lee, “Shooting America: American Images: Photography 1945–1980,” *Journal of American Studies* 2 (1986), 294.