

PICTURING IRONY: the subversive power of photography

Accompanying photographs may be accessed on <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~biscott/imlang/irony/irony1.htm>

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Can a picture be ironic? If to be ironic is to mean the opposite of what one says, how might an image convey the opposite of what it shows? How, in particular, does a photograph manage to do so? These are some of the key questions addressed here, but first, I would like to establish why it is worth bothering with irony at all in our appreciation of photography.

There are two good reasons why we should regard irony as more than merely an interesting aside. The first has to do with the increasing salience of irony not just in contemporary photography but in the arts more generally. The postmodernist distrust of meta-narratives and dominant representations has given rise to an increasingly self-questioning and self-referring style of art. During the last two decades in particular there has been a tendency among artists to use photography not as a definitive record of reality, but as a conspicuous artifice, one possible representation among many equally plausible representations of how the world appears. Since one of the main functions of irony is to subvert dominant representations, it is not surprising to find that irony figures prominently in photography today. The challenge is to understand how it works.

The second reason for coming to grips with irony has to do with the language of photography criticism, where 'ironical', 'ambiguous' and other related concepts have become terms of positive evaluation for photographs. The following extract from Graham Clarke's book *Photography*, one of the popular Oxford History of Art series, is representative of current criticism. Clarke (1997:207-8) is discussing *Madrid, Spain* by Henri Cartier-Bresson:

'This image is awash with a visual irony characteristic of his style. ... Here the relationship between the enigmatic wall and windows in the background and the children playing in the foreground is compounded by their awareness of the camera, and, overwhelmingly, by the presence of the large incongruous figure who moves across the scene in the middle area. We have, in that sense, a

geometry so complex as to displace the normal codes and terms of representation.'

The term 'visual irony' remains un-explained here, yet if we are interested in photography we need to understand what is said about it and how it is valued.

Dr Johnson's definition of irony as 'a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words' remains the most familiar and influential. Frequently cited examples of literary irony include Mark Antony's funeral oration in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in which he repeatedly refers to Brutus as 'an honourable man' and Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* in which it is suggested that Ireland's economic problems could be solved if Protestant landlords were to buy and eat the babies of impoverished Catholics. Everyday examples of irony often consist of a variant on someone saying 'Nice weather, isn't it!' in response to a particularly rainy day. The common denominator in each of these cases resides in the contrast between what is said and what is meant, and in the seeming incongruity in the choice of expression.

How does this definition of irony as an explicitly verbal phenomenon apply to the visual medium? How can a photograph, which is an imprint of light as it existed at a particular time and place, show one thing yet mean another? This article aims to show that a principled account of visual irony can be achieved by applying the 'echoic mention' theory of irony to photography (Sperber and Wilson 1981, Sperber 1984, 1990). In applying the theory, I look at two types of visual irony: word-based and wordless, and at two moods or functions: condemnatory and celebratory. I also show how echoic mention theory provides succinct and convincing criteria by which to evaluate irony and assess borderline cases. Having established *how* visual irony works, the paper ends with a discussion of *where* irony is located.

1. Word based visual irony.

The most obvious examples of irony in photography are word based. These include instances in which a billboard, or some other form of text, is incorporated into a larger image and where significantly a conflict comes into play between what the text says and what the surrounding picture shows.

Canonical examples of this kind of word-based irony are to be found in the widely disseminated Farm Security Administration photographs of the Great American Depression. Margaret Bourke-White and Dorothea Lange in particular capitalised on the ironic potential of billboards. In a series of photographs of the 'American Way of Life' ad campaign run during the 1930's, Bourke-White has one photograph where the billboard depicts a white American family of four, well dressed and smiling happily as they drive along in a new car (*fig. 1*). The strap-line at the top of the poster reads: 'World's Highest Standard of Living', and the text on the ad reads: 'There's no way like the American way'. Beneath the billboard stands a breadline of cold and ragged looking black Americans, queuing for handouts. The contrast between the way of life projected by the billboard, and the actual conditions endured by the poor people standing in its very shadow could not be more literal: whereas the idealised Americans are healthy wealthy and white, the actual Americans in this photograph are underfed, impoverished and black. Bourke-White's photograph offers a clear illustration of a contradiction between what is said and what is shown, of the discrepancy between the expectations set up by the advertisement and the reality which surrounds it.

A similar conflict is captured by a photograph of Dorothea Lange's in which the billboard shows a man reclining comfortably in the plush seat of a train, and which sports the caption: 'Next time, try the train. Relax' (*fig. 2*). Beneath it, two dispossessed men walk along a dusty road carrying their bags in their hands. Once again the 'meaning is contrary to the words' but, more significantly, two very different and essentially incompatible orders of existence have been juxtaposed, inviting us

to question the world view espoused by the dominant order - the one which asserts the expectations of the system rather than the reality which actually characterises society.

Are contrast and incongruity the only defining attributes of irony? A central component of the irony in these two photographs is the seeming obliviousness of the people within the picture (whether on the ground, in the ads or even 'behind' the ads) to the alternative reality they stand next to. Thus part of the irony of Bourke-White's photograph is that the caption 'There's no way like the American way' can be re-interpreted by the viewer to extend beyond the pink-tinted reality of the ad, and encompass the bedraggled breadline. According to this reading, the incongruous juxtaposition of whites and blacks, of haves and have-nots, is what characterises the uniqueness of the American way of life. This interpretation is diametrically opposed to what the copywriter would have had in mind, and it is probably far from what the people queuing have in mind since they all seem oblivious to the ad, but it is very much the favoured reading for the viewer of the picture, and of course that intended by the photographer. Reinterpretation of the evidence from a perspective of greater knowledge is an important component of irony.

Similarly, in Lange's photograph, part of the irony resides in the sheer impossibility for some people to afford the train: for them there just won't be a 'next time' since the choice implied by this term does not exist in their order of reality. The ad men who conceived of a world full of choice, and the man in the ad who is enjoying the benefits of having made the right choice, clearly inhabit one reality. The two men in the photograph, who are covering the distance on foot, inhabit another. As viewers, we have no way of knowing whether these two migrants are sensitive to the ironic contrast between their world and the one projected by the billboard, but there is no doubt that we ourselves are aware of it, and that Lange, through her framing of the subject, intended the photograph to be ironic.

This element of obliviousness on the part of one or more of the participants in an ironic situation, and of awareness on the part of the ironist and his audience, is a further defining property of irony. It is a component that is in fact present in the etymology of the term 'irony', which comes from the Greek word meaning *pretence*: *eirôn* is 'a dissembler'; *eirôneía* means 'assumed ignorance'. To some scholars of irony (Rodway, 1962:113), 'the sense of a dissembling that is meant to be seen through must remain fundamental if the word is to have any consistent function.' To others a 'serene unawareness' is the principal ingredient of irony: 'The victim of irony is serenely unaware that his words or actions convey a quite different meaning or assumption; the ironist "innocently" pretends to have this serene unawareness.' (Muecke, 1973:29). The observer is of course aware of both levels of representation.

For the purposes of this discussion, Dr Johnson's original definition of irony thus needs to be revised. First, the discrepancy between what is said and what is meant (or shown) needs to be understood as involving two possible but conflicting realities. Ironic contrast operates at an ideological level in that it addresses world views and associated belief systems. Other types of contrast, such as may be found in mendacity, non-sequiturs or ambiguity, do not necessarily involve ideology. Second, the definition needs to be supplemented with an element of pretence, or at least with a differential awareness between the 'victim' and the ironist-cum-audience. In the photographs discussed here for instance, the victim is anybody who believes in the world projected by the billboards, for as the surrounding visual evidence testifies, it represents a false reality.

Some of the defining properties of irony, as identified in the preceding discussion, may be itemised as follows:

- A dual perspective, one of which reveals the dominant representation, while the other offers a subversive alternative.
- An ideological component, which sets two orders of reality and associated belief systems into conflict with each other.

- A dissembling component, or at least an element of differential awareness, between the ironist-cum-audience and the unwitting victim of irony.
- An incongruity, which alerts the viewer to either the intention or the potential for irony.

The items listed here are not definitive since irony seems to defy any simple definition. Although there is much debate on the various components which make up irony, and on the diverse functions irony may serve, there is no consensus over what these should be. Perhaps the quest for a set of necessary and sufficient features is itself misguided, and a more heuristic approach is in order. Just such an approach is introduced in the next section.

2. The Echoic Mention Theory of Irony.

The echoic mention theory of irony (Sperber and Wilson 1981, Sperber 1984, 1990) offers us clear criteria by which to evaluate the presence of irony across verbal and visual modalities and even across cultures: 'A general theory of rhetoric should be concerned with basic psychological and interpretative mechanisms which remain invariant from culture to culture.' Sperber and Wilson (1981:297)

According to Sperber and Wilson (1981), the key distinction which needs to be made regarding irony is not so much between what is said and what is meant but rather between the *use* and *mention* of a proposition. This is illustrated by the following minimal pair:

(a) Natasha is a beautiful child

(b) 'Natasha' is a beautiful name

- a. involves the *use* of the term Natasha, and refers to a child, whereas (b) involves the *mention*

of the term, and refers to a word.

Irony involves the mention rather than the use of a proposition. An ironic utterance expresses a belief *about* one's utterance, rather than *by means of* it. Thus in the familiar ironical response to a rainy day 'Lovely weather isn't it', the speaker is not so much drawing attention to the weather as he is to his attitude towards the weather. Where mention rather than use is involved, the original proposition which is being reported on is inserted into quotes.

In addition to the mention component, irony entails a critical attitude towards the proposition being expressed. This critical edge, along with a possible warping through attitude, is what is alluded to by the term *echoic* in echoic mention theory.

Echoic mention may be explicit, as in this extract from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, where the targeted phrase is repeated:

. 'You take an eager interest in that gentleman's concerns', said Darcy in a less tranquil tone, and with a heightened colour.

'Who that knows what his misfortunes have been, can help feeling an interest in him?'

'His misfortunes!' repeated Darcy contemptuously, 'yes, his misfortunes have been great indeed.'

Or echoic mention may be implicit, as when a quote is used out of the blue. Stuck in a traffic jam in London on a cold, wet windy English spring, an ironist may say: 'Oh to be in England now that April's there' (Browning). Finally, echoic mention may be even less well signalled, and may refer to a tacit attitude or assumption. This is the case in Swift's *Modest Proposal*, and in Mark Antony's funeral oration, which subvert our assumptions concerning, respectively, the moral integrity of murderers and our duty to feed (rather than eat) children. No matter whether the echoic mention is explicit or implicit, what is central to our understanding of an utterance as ironic is a double recognition: 'a realisation that it is echoic, and a recognition of the type of attitude expressed.' (Sperber and Wilson, 1981:308).

How does echoic mention theory compare with the defining components of irony listed in the previous section? The *dual perspective* identified as the first component of irony is contained in the use-mention distinction, with 'use' referring to the dominant representation, and 'mention' to the subversive alternative. The *ideological component*, although not explicitly included in the echoic mention theory, may readily be contained within 'the recognition of the type of attitude expressed.' As we shall see in the discussion of celebratory versus condemnatory irony, the type of attitude expressed can be ludic, humorous and philosophical as well as ideological. The *dissembling component* is contained in the echoic element of the theory since an echoic mention 'doubles up' as the real thing. Finally, with regard to triggers, the recognition of echoic mention is what alerts us to the presence of irony. The types of incongruity which might trigger this recognition are not enumerated since these are case specific, but as we shall see, are likely to include contrast, reversal, literalisation, hyperbole, register shifts and corruption.

Echoic mention theory can therefore be seen to address the key components of irony as identified above, but it does so both more economically (in two words) and more extensively (in that it applies across modalities and cultures). The main strength of the echoic mention theory of irony resides in its identification of a common dynamic which underlies different types of irony. Rather than a proliferating checklist of characteristics it offers a single formula, and thus provides us with a handy diagnostic for a trope which has so often defied analysis. In particular, it allows us to understand visual irony in the same terms as verbal irony.

3. Echoic mention and visual irony.

Sperber and Wilson's theory may be applied to visual irony in the following way: incongruous juxtapositions alert us to our preconceptions about how things should be - either how we are used to seeing them or how we expect to see them (*use*) - by introducing an element into the image which flouts our expectations. This dislocation between expectation and actual representation introduces the quote marks of *mention*, and finally the ironist's value judgment introduces the *echoic* distancing.

With regard to photography, the echoic mention theory of irony explains why word-based irony is so easily identified: the text generally provides the proposition which is to be echoed, and its contrast with the remainder of the image signals the photographer's attitude to it. Thus in the case of billboards the caption is *used* by the ad agency (that is to say the message is being communicated at face value), but is *mentioned* in the photograph (that is to say the message has been put into quotes), and finally questioned or condemned (the *echoic* element) by the photographer's use of context.

As we have seen, Bourke-White and Lange both ridiculed the world projected by the billboards by means of the incongruities present in the larger context they photographed, a context in fact which invites us to utter the words on the billboards with an ironic tone of voice. The very existence of a distinct tone of voice associated with irony is the intonational equivalent of the quote marks which may signal echoic mention in the written language. In a photograph, where neither punctuation nor intonation can come to our aid, we rely primarily on incongruity in order to recognise ironic intent. Incongruity, in turn, depends on a knowledge of larger context and

background assumptions. As we shall see, incongruity is not limited to two conflicting elements within an image, but may occur between the world as depicted in an image and the disruption it causes our own prior world view and preconceptions.

In the two pictures discussed so far it is the surrounding world which challenges the billboard world. The relationship between text and image can also work the other way round however, so that it is the text which challenges the dominant reality projected by the image. In Robert Doisneau's photograph of the *Rue Jacques Prevert, Paris 1955* (fig. 3), an arrogant looking man in hat, tie and pinstripe suit, cigarette in mouth, dog at his heels, stands in front of a shop. Judging from the awning, the shop is called 'Merode', but because the man's head obscures the letter 'O' from the name on the shop front, the remaining letters spell out 'merde' ('shit' in French). Doisneau uses this coincidence in order to pass an ironical judgment on the man: he may think he's hot, but we see him in another light, and unbeknown to him, he has been labelled as such. In the terms of echoic mention theory, the man's body language is a genuine statement about himself (use). This same body language is signalled as a pose (mention) by the photographer, whose critical (echoic) attitude is reflected in the text of the shop name. In other words, whereas the subject expresses his attitudes *by means of* his pose, Doisneau expresses his attitudes *about* the man's pose, or more colloquially, about the man as poseur.

Billboards and shop signs, in offering a likely source of echoic mention, have frequently been used by street photographers for ironic effect. Their drawback of course is the difficulty of chancing upon the prerequisite elements in the right combination. It is for this reason that many photographers have created an ironic contrast through the use of the more controlled media of montage, collage and captions.

John Heartfield, one of the best known political satirists, provides a good illustration of the echoic mention theory at work. In his photo-montages, Heartfield typically illustrated a slogan from the Nazi rhetoric of the time with images which were in some way incongruous. Thus in one of his cover images of the AIZ (fig. 4) the title reads 'Hitler's Dove of Peace' and provides the caption which is to be mentioned, or put in scare quotes. The image shows a hawk perched on a gloved hand. In its beak, instead of an olive branch, it holds a feather to denote its predatory nature, on its wing is an armband with the swastika. The message here is clear: Hitler's dove is a hawk, his peace is in fact war. The echoic element involves simple inversion, an effect which invites the viewer to see the reality behind the disguise or pretence of Nazi rhetoric.

In another montage, Heartfield uses literalisation rather than reversal in order to achieve ironic effect (fig. 5). The main caption 'Hurrah! The butter is finished' is inspired by Goering's Hamburg speech where he said: 'Iron always makes a country strong, butter and lard only make the people fat.' Heartfield shows a family sitting round the dining table chewing on a dismantled bicycle. In the foreground a baby tucks into (or literally 'cuts its teeth on') an axe, while in the background photographs of Hitler make up the wallpaper.

Photomontage has a long history as a tool for political criticism. Much of its power comes from the potential it offers to put text and image, or image and image in conflict. In so doing it is able to combine two conflicting orders of reality, and thus to expose the hypocrisy and illusions so often associated with the political arena.

It is important to recognise that there are many different ways to create a conflict in representation. In the two billboard and the *Dove of Peace* examples, the images show the opposite of what the text says. Sometimes however the image renders the text literally as in Heartfield's 'Hurrah, the butter is finished' or Doisneau's *Rue Jacques Prevert*. In other cases the image acts as a hyperbole, exaggerating the text, as in Peter Kennard's *Defended to Death, 1982* (fig 6), which shows planet earth with a gas mask on it, the Russian and American flags behind each lens of the goggles, and missiles sprouting out of the mouthpiece. In yet other ironic montages a shift in register signals the echoic mention involved in irony, as in Alex Ayuli and Jeff

Sutton's montage (fig. 7). Here, cartoon character eyes and whiskers are superimposed onto a composite portrait of Reagan and Stalin. And in yet other cases a rogue insertion or corruption of the text is the trigger for irony, as in Barbara Kruger's *I shop therefore I am*, 1987 (fig. 8).

Reversal, literalisation, hyperbole, register shifts and corruption are just some of the various devices which can be used either verbally or visually in order to signal ironic intent. What they all have in common is that they provide a means of incorporating, or at least alluding to, the original proposition which is to be questioned by means of one of these distorting devices. This dual perspective, one genuine but misleading, the other critical and revealing, is central to what we understand by irony.

4. Contemporary uses of word-based irony.

Carrie Mae Weems is a contemporary black American photographer who seeks to expose the clichés which determine our view of coloured people. In a picture which bears the prominent caption *Black Woman with Chicken* (fig. 9), instead of showing a black servant plucking a chicken in the back yard, which is the stereotype most likely to come to mind, Weems portrays a young black girl sitting at a table holding a Kentucky-fry drumstick. The reality of the image challenges the stereotype associated with the caption. In another series entitled 'Colored People' she shows triptychs of young people with titles such as *Magenta Colored Girl*, *Golden Yella Girl*, *Chocolate Colored Man*, *Blue Black Boy* (fig. 10). Each triptych consists of three identical portraits, and each portrait has incorporated in the frame beneath it one of the three words of the title, as if it were branded by it. Significantly, it is the prints that are tinted magenta or blue or yellow or brown. Since the photographs themselves are monochrome the titles, contrary to expectation, do not reflect the different skin hues of the sitters. In both these examples the captions are used to summon a default interpretation which is then questioned by the incongruity of the image. In other words, Weems uses the image to put mention quotes around the caption and thereby forces us to recognise the preconceptions which we unwittingly harbour.

In another work by Weems, it is the text which contains both echoic mention and critical attitude, and the image serves as illustration or additional articulation of what is meant. This is the case in her 1990 photograph where the caption reads: '*Jim, if you choose to accept, the mission is to land on your own two feet*' (fig. 11). The echoic mention is drawn from the film *Mission Impossible*, and the image, in showing a man listening to the tape recording of these words, echoes the scenes of Mr Phelps doing the same. But whereas the movie protagonist listens to the well nigh impossible mission assigned to him in dramatic outdoor contexts, the Jim in the photograph is at a kitchen table, a glass of whiskey in hand and a cloud of cigarette smoke around him. 'To land on your own two feet' is a ludicrously easy task in this context compared to that in the film version. The photograph signals that it is nicotine and alcohol dependence, as well as the implied loss of a lover, which is what he has to recover from. Weems's attitude towards her subject is revealed in this incongruous contrast between the two missions in question.

Barbara Kruger is another contemporary photographer who works with word-based irony. Her work consists of photographs she has found in the press and which she combines with familiar idioms, often creating an odd juxtaposition. This forces a reinterpretation of both image and idiom and a corresponding questioning of the assumptions inherent in them. Kruger's *I shop therefore I am*, 1987 (fig. 8), which shows a grasping hand has already been mentioned. Although it is easy to recognise this as a corrupted allusion to Descartes's adage 'I think therefore I am', it is perhaps less easy to identify the photographer's attitude from the image alone. As it turns out we know from Kruger's larger body of work that this was an ironical comment on consumerism and on the message that the advertising world has disseminated to consumers that 'we are what we buy'. For those who first came across this motto on T-shirts, shopping bags, mugs and sundry other consumer items, however, the motto may as happily have been used literally as mentioned ironically.

Kruger, in her own words, is 'interested in how identities are constructed, how stereotypes are formed, how narratives sort of congeal and become history' (in Tillman, 1999: 189). Many of her collages accordingly address questions of identity, subjugation and morality. Characteristic of Kruger's work is a 1992 collage in which a man is cutting a spool of film with a pair of scissors, and the text, written in bold white Futura font on a red background, is pasted onto a large portion of the photograph and reads 'A picture is worth more than a thousand words' (fig. 12). But is it, the collage makes us ask. If indeed we believe in the idiom, it is probably because pictures are often thought of as a more direct representation of the world than words, which are readily manipulated and misinterpreted. Yet the picture in question shows a film in the process of being edited: the slice of life it represents is about to be cut, spliced and reconstructed. Pictures, the visual evidence suggests, are not beyond human manipulation.

At one level of irony, the truth of the adage, that is to say the set of beliefs upon which the idiom is based, is overturned by the evidence in the picture. But even as we begin to recognise the possible 'treachery' of pictures, we have to admit that it is a picture which provided the evidence in the first place. So a picture *is* perhaps worth a thousand words after all, even if what this particular picture has achieved is to make us question the authenticity of pictures!

At another level of irony, it takes a mere handful of words to alert us to the significance of this particular picture, which is that they are as prone to manipulation as are words. Finally, in so far as we believe in both words and picture, we the viewers are the ultimate victims of manipulation. Even ironic distancing, Kruger suggests, does not release us from the prevalence of visual and linguistic determinism.

Irony permeates Kruger's work from her choice of graphic design ('the look is *io ipso* "ironic", because we're all several decades beyond the look.' Gary Indiana (1999:11)), to her use of ambiguous deixis (we are never too sure who the pronouns refer to in straplines such as: *Use only as directed; Your assignment is to divide and conquer; I am your reservoir of poses; You are not yourself* (fig. 13)). As the deixis changes, so does the message, creating the potential for ironic contrast. Finally, at the level of text and image interplay, reversal, hyperbole and literalisation figure prominently as ironic triggers.

Some of Kruger's work puts the very notion of representation under fire. A number of her images question preconceptions of identity as being coherent and seamless and present it instead as fragmented and multi-faceted. These include: *You are not yourself, 1982; You thrive on mistaken identity, 1881; and We are your circumstantial evidence, 1983*. In these images, women are presented either as fragmented reflections or refractions. In *Your fictions become history, 1983* (fig. 16), a photograph of a classical statue is torn into confetti and roughly reconstructed. These demonstrate a further level of complexity in Kruger's work, that of reflexivity. Kruger uses reflection, refraction and fragmentation of the image to mirror her own attitude towards representation, which is that representation is dangerously deterministic. Thus in addition to the irony contained in the 'look', and the ambiguity and potential for ironic conflict both in the text and in the dynamic between text and image, we see here a final level of irony in which Kruger presents the object of irony as the act of representation itself. In Carol Squiers' (1999:148) words, Kruger 'constructs her own traps and then springs them, using the seduction of photography as both subject and bait'.

5. Wordless visual irony.

Since all the instances of irony discussed so far have involved language, the question arises as to whether a photograph must contain words in order to be ironic, or can irony be communicated through image alone? A photograph of a cycle path showing the icon of a bicycle and next to it a

crashed and twisted bicycle is ironic because our expectation of a cycle path is that it is safe for bicycles (*fig. 17*). The icon provides mention of this, whereas the visual evidence suggests otherwise. One could argue however that the icon of a bicycle is a semiotic sign and therefore quasi-linguistic.

There are wordless equivalents to many of the photographs discussed which provide examples of purely visual irony. Thus Kruger's *a picture is worth more than a thousand words* brings to mind Elliott Erwitt's *Versailles, 1975* (*fig. 18*), which shows part of a gallery with gilt frames on the wall. In one frame we see a classical portrait of a nobleman, next to it the large frame contains what appears to be a small slip of paper. Three people stand in front of this frame gazing intently at the paper. Nobody is looking at the pictures. The image is ironical because it flouts our expectations that people go to art galleries in order to look at the pictures which are there (rather than to read the notices informing them as to why a picture is no longer there). It may even be that the adage 'a picture is worth a thousand words' comes to mind, providing the target of echoic mention which the visual evidence then undermines. The most striking difference between these two renderings of a similar topic is that Kruger uses words and uses them 'in your face' whereas Elliott eschews words and depends on implication exclusively. Kruger's irony is earnest, possibly even aggressive; Elliott's is irreverent and amusing.

There are also billboard photographs which do not rely on text for their ironic effect. In a photograph by Philip Jones Griffiths (*fig. 19*) a man crouches under the weight of a disproportionately large billboard panel which he carries on his shoulder. On the panel is the picture of a smiling woman with a tennis racket propped lightly on her shoulder. The contrast in size is certainly amusing, in the way that differences of human scale so often are, but the irony resides in the contrast in lifestyles symbolised by the two figures in the photograph. Once again the conflict is between the haves and the have-nots, the leisured and the labouring classes, with the image on the panel providing the mention which the smaller figure echoes. The irony in this particular case is accentuated by the similarity in pose - both figures carry something on their shoulders - but whereas the billboard girl carries a tennis racket, which here symbolises a life of ease, the worker carries a huge weight on his shoulder, the weight of the leisured classes, one is tempted to say metaphorically.

In another photograph by Philip Jones Griffiths (*fig. 20*), shot in Northern Ireland, a soldier crouches behind a garden wall, partly obscured by a bush. His eyes are alert, his body is poised for action, his gun points out of the frame. Behind him a woman in an apron mows the lawn. The irony of this photograph resides in the incongruity of two incompatible orders of experience inhabiting the same frame: a uniformed gun-totting soldier whom we associate with violence, damage and death on the one hand, and a housewife at her daily chores, symbol of peaceful domesticity on the other. There is no text here to help us distinguish between what is said and what is meant, or what is being cited ironically as opposed to what is being said earnestly. Instead, in order to appreciate the irony involved, we appeal to our knowledge of the world, to the symbolic value of the two components in the picture, and to their incompatibility in the usual scheme of things.

It would seem then that if a system of beliefs is readily enough available (the very notion of 'the usual scheme of things' entails a system of belief), and that if an image can bring to mind this belief system by means of an easily identifiable symbol, then we do not need words in order to access a dominant representations. Once a world view has been summoned, the remainder of the picture must in some way question it in order to achieve ironic effect. The most obvious way of questioning it is by introducing an element of incongruity. As noted above, the ironic effect will be enhanced by (and indeed may even depend on) a further element of obliviousness or a discrepancy in awareness. Neither the housewife nor the soldier seems aware of the other's presence, let alone of the significance of their combined presence.

In a similarly ironic photograph (fig. 21), Jones Griffiths shows mothers and children going about their daily business alongside the diminutive figure of a soldier peering over some sandbags, gun in hand. He seems as unconcerned by the traffic of civilian life as do the civilians by his presence. Although they both occupy the same space, they seem to inhabit different realities. Further irony is to be found in the relative scale of soldier and shoppers. The army's image is 'big' or at least self-aggrandising, but it has been significantly diminished here. In echoic mention terms, our prior conception of the army as important and imposing is the proposition being mentioned in both these images, and its depiction as insignificant and possibly ineffectual expresses the ironist's attitude.

If we look at other work by Jones Griffiths, we find that symbols of war are often juxtaposed incongruously with symbols of peaceful everyday life. But other symbols also figure, such as religious icons. In *Earthquake victims, Sicily, 1968* (fig. 22), a statue of a saint with holy child in his arms turns his back to the rescue teams and damaged buildings in the background. In *Human remains, Cambodia, 1980* (fig. 23), a reclining Buddha smiles beatifically over a mass of human bones and skulls in the foreground. Both these images represent supposedly omniscient, omnipotent and magnanimous religious figures in contexts which show them at best unaware, and at worst indifferent, to human suffering. These representations of them, in reversing our expectations, force us to question our beliefs and in so doing alert us to the possibility that we were hitherto duped by these beliefs, that we were the victims of our own fallible world views.

6. Condemnatory versus celebratory irony.

Not all reversals of expectations force an earnest revision of our belief systems however. The war photography of Philip Jones Griffiths discussed so far is condemnatory in its intent, and fits into the long tradition of photography as a medium for social judgment. Practitioners of condemnatory irony assume the responsibility of exposing those aspects of human affairs which are morally reprehensible. In particular they see incongruity as a symptom of a flawed world.

What I call 'celebratory' irony in contrast lacks the critical edge so often associated with irony. Or rather, instead of condemning incongruity as an inherent flaw in the rational order of things, its practitioners celebrate it as an inevitable aspect of the human condition. They emphasise a ludic as opposed to corrective response to the vagaries of life. In Gibbs's (1994:371) words: 'People's recognition of the inchoateness of the human condition requires that we suspend belief in ourselves and celebrate incongruities.'

As we saw in Erwit's *Versailles 1972*, humour displaces earnestness. In another of his photographs, *Coney Island, New York, 1975* (fig. 24), a vast expanse of sky is punctuated by a seagull perched on a streetlight, of which only the top is visible in the upper right corner of the image. Far below it, in the bottom left corner, is a flying aeroplane. We all know of course that planes fly higher than birds, and Erwit's photograph does not challenge our beliefs on this subject. The irony resides in the reversal of expectation caused by this incongruous juxtaposition. The reversal acts as echoic mention of the 'natural' order of things. It is moreover a playful form of irony which, in making us suspend our usual perspective, foregrounds the elements of pretence and dissimilitude classically associated with irony.

Another even more blatant example of pretence can be found in the work of Duane Michals. In a set of six images entitled *Building a Pyramid* (fig. 25), he shows himself building a small pyramid out of one or two dozen stones. The actual pyramids of Giza stand in the background providing the frame of reference. The penultimate photograph shows Michals walking away from his completed task, and the final shot zooms into his pyramid which, given the effects of perspective, appears to be the same size as the actual pyramids. Obviously nobody would fall for this trick, but we all recognise and smile at the ironic pretence involved.

Disimilitude often involves a differential awareness between subject and viewer. In a photograph by Elliot Erwit, *Nice, 1968* (fig. 26), a man strides along a seaside promenade, looking at the view, his hands clasped behind his back. Where his foot comes in contact with the ground a dark puddle snakes out: is his seeming insouciance a disguise for the fact that he has just wet himself, or is he the unwitting object of the photographer's trap? If the subject in the photograph is indeed oblivious of his predicament as apprehended by the viewer, then he evinces what Muecke refers to as 'serenely confident unawareness' (1973:29 and 1969:29-34). Such confident lack of awareness was traditionally a central component of irony and derived from the dynamic between the ironical player and the truthful if more gullible one in traditional Greek plays.

Henri Cartier-Bresson is another photographer in whose work serene unawareness figures prominently. In one of his best known photographs, *At the coronation parade of George VI's, London 1937* (fig. 26), a crowd waits earnestly for the procession, while beneath them a man lies fast asleep on the newspaper littered ground, oblivious both to the procession and to the contrast that he strikes with the rest of the crowd. The crowd is behaving as crowds no doubt 'should', but by means of this juxtaposition Cartier-Bresson laughs both at the sleeper for his indifference and at the crowd for their keenness.

This discrepancy in awareness between subject and viewer is evident in other photographs such as *Ski lift, Switzerland, 1991* (fig. 27), where a man stands beneath the huge cement counterweight of a ski lift apparently unaware of the danger he is in should the weight fall; *Newcastle upon Tyne, 1978* (fig. 28), which shows a young couple caught in a passionate embrace oblivious of the many headstones which surround them or of the incongruous juxtaposition of procreation and death contained in the scene. In *Bathers, Zurich, 1953* (fig. 30), a couple float on lilos on the lake blissfully unaware of the two ducks swimming past them and more significantly, of the resemblance between the two pairs: we do not usually equate people with ducks, but seen from this perspective, they are amusingly similar. Our amusement is moreover enhanced by the couple's obliviousness to the similarity. In yet another photograph, *Pleasure boat, Paris, 1966* (fig. 31), the relationship between the leisured and the labouring classes is captured in an image of a tourist boat on the Seine in which the passengers are all white and above deck, and the window washers are black and on a lower rung, both literally and metaphorically. The irony resides partly in the juxtaposition of these two mutually exclusive levels of existence, but also in the obliviousness of all but one of the wealthy whites to the workers who support their leisure.

The works of all these photographers is ironical in so far as they set up a frame of reference, and then subvert it by means of an incongruity. In so doing they reveal the dominant representation not to be definitive. In all cases the recognition of a differential awareness between ironist and victim enhances the sense of incongruity. But whereas Jones Griffith uses irony in order to question dominant representations of war, religion and human nature with a view to exposing and condemning the fallacies of our belief systems, Erwit and Cartier-Bresson tend to use irony in order to single out amusing incongruities as they chance upon them, and Michals blatantly creates the incongruity under our eyes.

The essential difference between condemnatory and celebratory irony is that the former is political and the latter philosophical. Whereas the ideological content of condemnatory irony is familiar to us, the philosophical content of celebratory irony may benefit from elucidation. It refers in part to the notion of 'being philosophical about life', that is to say, to the understated humour which some assume in the face of adversity:

'Humour - the divine flash that reveals the world in its moral ambiguity and man in his profound incompetence to judge others. Humour; the intoxicating relativity of human things; the strange pleasure that comes from the certainty that there is no certainty'. (Milan Kundera, *Testaments of Beauty*, p 31).

Just as 'the certainty that there is no certainty' is central to Kundera's definition of humour, this concept is also present in the philosopher Richard Rorty's definition of irony. To him an ironist is 'the sort of person who faces up to the contingencies of his or her most central beliefs and desires', and who is free of the delusion that such beliefs and desires 'refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance' (Rorty, 1989:xv). Rorty's claim is that there is no final vocabulary with which to describe a person, an event, or a truth. He advises us therefore to be ironic enough about our own putative final vocabularies, and curious enough about everyone else's, in order to engage in a constructive dialogue with each other. Our aim should be an expanding repertoire of alternative descriptions rather than 'the One Right Description'.

7. Contemporary uses of wordless irony.

Several contemporary photographers have risen to the challenge of defying 'the one right description' and have appealed to irony in order to do so. Barbara Kruger and Carrie Mae Weems have already been mentioned as practitioners of word-based irony. Among those who have worked with wordless irony is Cindy Sherman, known for her use of self-portrayal to explore issues of female identity and representation. Her work is particularly concerned with the 'elision of image with identity', the way in which women's identity has in large part been *created*, rather than *re-presented*, by representations of women. In addition to popular culture and its consumerist credo, Sherman undermines many other established genres: film, fashion, men's magazines, religious paintings, classical portraits and fairy tales among them. As Elizabeth Smith has said:

'Sherman's undermining of established genres ... points to a satirical vein that underpins her work's late 20th century ironic sensibility. Through her use of trenchantly absurd juxtapositions and transformations and her embrace of melodrama, she succeeds in parodying the construction and presentation of myth and archetype in all these genres.' (Smith, 1997:24).

Sherman undermines dominant representations primarily by means of two devices which we have already encountered: reversal and literalisation. In a series of fashion shots done in the mid 80's for instance, she projects her models as victims or criminals rather than the mannequins we are familiar with. Their facial skin is badly burnt (presumably by beautifying creams), their hair dried out and unmanageable (through the effects of dye and shampoos), their look is either manic or depressed. In one case the model has blood dripping off her hands, as if fresh from a murder (figures 32 and 33).

There is a double irony underlying this work. The first level has to do with the use of contrast and even exaggeration in order to expose the false promises of fashion advertising. The second comes into play when we realise that Sherman's fashion work was actually commissioned by a fashion house and used for publicity (Dorothee Bis, 1983). Why, we might ask, would a fashion house wish to project an image of itself which is an ironic parody of what it stands for? And why would an artist whose life's aim is to expose the brainwashing inherent in advertising and in the representation of women more generally agree to work for the 'enemy'? The answer must be that where the fashion house is concerned, it adds to their kudos and credibility to be able to assimilate criticism and even turn it into a virtue, since it is a powerful force indeed which can turn enmity into complicity. It also shows them to have their finger on the pulse of cutting edge culture: in this case the work of a photographer with a cult following.

Where Cindy Sherman is concerned, her motives are as ever more open to speculation, but a plausible interpretation is that by getting a fashion house to appropriate images which are explicitly designed to expose and undermine the world it stands for, she reveals first the total indifference of that world to ethical considerations of how it uses and abuses its models and consumers. Second, she reveals the near impossibility of making a stand against that world.

The danger with this kind of double think is that its subtleties may easily be lost on the viewer, with the consequent loss not just of the critical edge of her irony, but of the public's recognition that irony is at all involved. In fact this is exactly what happened with her series 'Horizontals' (figures 34 and 35), which was designed to parody the supine, passive and vulnerable sex objects teenage girls are so often depicted as being. In each image Sherman portrays herself in a clichéd pose, either 'asking for it', fearing an assault, recovering from one or just waiting forlornly for the phone to ring. The horizontal format forces a prostrate pose, and emulates men's magazine centrefolds. According to Smith (1997:24), Sherman is inverting representations in order to redress them. In other words, she is using irony to criticise society, and the trigger in this particular case is literalisation. Although literalisation, as we have already seen, is a typical trigger of ironic intent, Sherman's irony is probably too insidious in this case. The response to these photographs was highly critical and revealed that a good proportion of the public had understood them literally, rather than ironically, as a case of use rather than mention:

'When this series was shown, Sherman was criticised by some as having created images that reaffirm sexist stereotypes, and Artforum [which had commissioned the work] eventually rejected the pictures.' (Amada Cruz, 1997:6).

Sherman's mimicry of the stereotype she sought to expose was too authentic and lacked the element of incongruity which signals the presence of irony. The most obviously ironic collections in Sherman's extensive body of work are those in which the echoic mention is readily identifiable, whether this be the film or fashion world, religious and historical portraits, or fairy tales.

Photographers often present their work in series in order to avoid misinterpretation. Much as Mark Antony's oft repeated 'for he is an honourable man' alerts us to the significance of this seemingly innocuous term, Karen Knorr's irony depends on the larger body of work she presents for its effect:

'When working with humour and irony, one needs to frame or contextualise the 'statements'. A tension has to be set up by repetition in the pose or angle of view. It is the series as context that produces the irony. The image texts on their own become literal, losing their humour.' (Knorr, 1996:404).

Knorr's series *Connoisseurs* is 'an attempt to parody received ideas of beauty and taste in British High Culture', and in *Belgravia* and *Gentlemen* she aims to reject the cult of the personality linked to society portraiture (figures 37 and 38). The portraits are not named, rather, the poses of the sitters are interpreted as a 'social gesture', that is to say a set of gestures which reflects a whole social class, prejudices and all. Her work, she explains, is about attitudes which are 'classed' as much as gendered, not about particular individuals. Seen in isolation, her images might be interpreted as cases of 'use' rather than 'mention', and run the risk as she says, of being read literally.

Chuck Samuel and Yasumasa Morimura have similarly presented their work in series. Both draw on the photographic canon for echoic mention and having reproduced the original poses and lighting faithfully, substitute a male in the place of the female models found in the original. Chuck Samuel reproduces black and white masterpieces from the 1930s such as Weston's *Nude 1936* and Man Ray's *Violon d'Ingres* (fig. 38), whereas Yasumasa Morimura in his series entitled *Self-portrait as a movie actress* recreates famous colour shots from the 1950s and 1960s of Marlene Dietrich and Marilyn Monroe among others (fig. 39), conspicuously sporting false breasts where necessary.

In what way are these images ironical? If we run through some of the defining properties of irony discussed so far, we find that they make mention of existing representations which have common currency in our culture and introduce a distortion which invites viewers to reconsider their

preconceptions. There is also an element of pretence and dissimilitude. In addition, the images are well crafted and the effect is witty. But is this a case of irony or of parody? Sperber and Wilson (1981:311) claim that whereas both irony and parody are types of mention, 'irony involves change of meaning, whereas parody involves imitation.' Hutcheon (1989:14) for one argues that a change of meaning is definitely involved in the reversal of dominant gendered representations: 'Morimura [and others] ... also recall the history of art in their work and, through ironic alterations, recode its gendered representations in gay male terms.'

It could be argued that a simple gender reversal is not a sufficiently finely honed tool to question our worldview, though one could also claim that the degree of subtlety one demands of irony is ultimately a subjective matter. This issue is an important one since our understanding of irony depends in large part on a shared definition of the concept. Although I will return to the role of subjectivity in irony, I would like here to use the echoic mention theory as a diagnostic for evaluating borderline cases of irony.

8. Is it irony?

The following two examples, which I myself would consider marginal examples of ironic photographs, have been claimed by critics to epitomise the genre. How well do they pass the echoic mention diagnostic?

The work of Sherrie Levine consists of a set of photographs of famous photographs. That is to say, she has made photographic copies of a number of famous photographs by renowned male photographers, and exhibited them with the titles such as '*after Weston*', '*after Ansel*' (fig. 40). According to Naomi Rosenblum (1997:577), the works of Levine: 'express ironic attitudes towards cultural stereotypes in general and toward the particular claims of the photograph as a highly valued aesthetic object.'

How do Levine's images conform to the working definition provided by the echoic mention theory of irony? The mention component is clearly present since the pictures not only allude to existing images but actually reproduce them. In contrast, the echoic element, which involves a distortion or incongruity, is not evident at all. As a result, no conflicting representations of reality are involved since these are exact replicas, nor is there any element of pretence since Levine openly presents them as replicas. In order to be interpreted as ironical these works need, I surmise, to be understood as follows: the echoic mention refers not the photographs being reproduced but to their status as works of art. The lack of any distorting trigger is paradoxically a central part of the irony: it literalises the untouchable status of masterpieces. The target of her irony is the value of photographic reproductions and the hypocrisy involved in attributing all the credit for a picture to the photographer when, depending on his practices, he may not have touched the print which is on display.

Levine's work may indeed be reflexive and critical, but I am not convinced that it is ironical. Its shortcoming is not, as in Sherman's Horizontals, the absence of a sufficiently well signalled mention, but rather the absence of a visible attitude or critical distancing. It is only once we have been instructed as to how her images should be read that the target of Levine's irony becomes accessible. However, since irony depends on the frames of reference which one brings to bear in interpreting it, a picture is arguably no less ironic for coming with an explanatory text, its irony is just less obviously accessible.

What of Clarke's appraisal of Cartier-Bresson's *Madrid, Spain 1933* (fig. 41) as an image 'awash with a visual irony'? It is true that differential awareness is involved, since the children are aware of the camera but the central figure of the man is not, and it is also true that the man strikes a somehow incongruous figure as he walks past. However, I would argue that awareness and incongruity by themselves do not add up to irony. There is no echoic mention here, no system of

beliefs is being questioned, no critical attitude is being expressed, nor is there any reinterpretation of the world in the light of available evidence. If there is any one criterion of irony, it is the simultaneous presentation of a world view and critical distancing from it. Does this mean the image is not ironic, or that I personally fail to see the irony in it? This depends on where we believe irony to reside and is the subject of the concluding section.

To summarise, we have seen that the central pitfall of wordless visual irony resides in the difficulty of establishing clearly enough the dominant representation and associated system of beliefs which photographers seek to subvert by means of their images. Where words are involved, ironic intent is clearer because text and image can be played off against each other more precisely, with the words generally providing the mention which the remainder of the image undermines in some way. Without the help of words, an ironic picture must both allude to a world view and knock it down at one and the same time. The challenge is to allude unambiguously to the world view being mentioned, which is why widely recognisable symbols work so well. Jones Griffith uses icons of war and religion, and questions what they stand for by means of incongruous juxtaposition. Sherman parodies consumer images as well as female representations from the art canon. Samuels and Morimura similarly subvert images from the photographic canon.

In other cases, echoic mention appeals to our common knowledge of the relative size, power and importance of things in the world. Size and its associated metaphorical import is present in Jones Griffith's ironic rendering of the leisured and the labouring classes in the Thai film poster, as it is in the Northern Ireland shopping scene with backgrounded diminutive soldier. Size also figures in Elliot's plane and bird, where it signals power and lift, and in Michal's pyramid, where it signals grandeur and permanence. Echoic mention can also refer to the unawareness of the victim of irony, as we saw in the work of Cartier-Bresson. The final trigger of wordless ironic intention surveyed here was work in series, which helps to provide the necessary framework for ironic contrast.

Once echoic mention has been successfully identified, evidence of the photographer's attitude needs to be established. An echoic mention without attendant attitude qualifies as simple allusion, homage or inter-textuality rather than irony. The difficulty encountered with Samuel, Morimura's and Levine's work is that their attitude towards the photographs they were echoing is, for many of us, either too obvious (gender reversal alone does not guarantee irony) or not explicit enough (what exactly is Levine objecting to by means of her reproductions?).

Finally, the pitfall of failing to signal echoic mention was illustrated by Sherman's Horizontal series, where the public seems not to have recognised the images as cases of mention, and interpreted them as genuine instances of sexually stereotyped and exploited teenagers. It has also occurred in the case of Barbara Kruger's work, prompting the following observations from Rosalyn Deutsche (1999:77): 'Some critics mistake Kruger's exploration of violence for violence itself.' The failure to distinguish between use and mention is already a risk in the verbal medium, and even more so in the written medium where ironic intention can not be signalled by intonation. Since there is no equivalent to an ironic tone of voice in the visual medium, it is not surprising that visual irony is so much more at risk of being overlooked.

9. Locating Irony.

The challenge identified at the start of this article was to understand how visual irony works; how a photograph can possibly show one thing and mean another. In concluding, I would like to briefly address the question of *where* irony resides. Is it possible or indeed useful to distinguish between ironic situations, ironic pictures and ironic viewers?

An ironic situation or event is one in which there is no ironist but only a victim and an observer (Muecke, 1973:28). This type of irony is called 'situational irony' and tends to be seen as accidental, the product of fate. Situational irony contrasts with verbal irony (also known as 'behavioural irony' in order to transcend medium-specific connotations, but referred to here as 'ironic picture'), which *does* involve an ironist, one whose explicit purpose is to express his attitude towards a state of affairs.

We have to ask whether situational irony can exist in photography. Is it possible for the photographer to be a mere observer recording an 'objectively' ironic situation or is he always an ironist purposefully combining components in order to achieve ironic effect?

It is generally accepted that ironic situations are those which appeal to shared beliefs and expectations. In the famous picture of Elian Gonzales broadcast around the world in April 2000 (*fig. 42*), a diminutive and helpless figure is shown face to face with a fierce looking and massively armed US soldier. The situation is ironical in that no right thinking person can possibly believe that so much might is needed in order to cage such a lightweight prey, and yet the US government clearly must have thought so or this situation would not have arisen. But even though the situation is obviously ironical, the photograph itself is essential in recording that particular dimension of it. Another might have focussed on the child's fear and made an emotional rather than ironical statement. In other words, ironic situations are often only evidently ironical once they have been processed by the ironic sensibility of a particular photographer. It therefore takes an acute observer to recognise an incongruous juxtaposition and seize both the moment and the angle in order to record it. As Louis Pasteur said, 'chance favours the informed mind', and the work of Philip Jones Griffiths and Henri Cartier Bresson illustrate the way in which these two photographers trained their minds to see the potential for ironic situations. It is worth noticing also how their work reflects the distinct ironic bent of each man's mind.

In the case of ironic pictures, we are of course dealing as much with the mind which framed the image as with the image itself. Where *found* images are concerned, the situation depicted might have been less obviously ironical to the casual viewer and is therefore more dependent on the ironic sensibilities of a particular photographer. The potential for irony depends on the photographer's originality of perception, and maybe even on his eccentric (cum dissembling) representation, all of which require skill in the craft of photography: use of perspective, framing, foreshortening etc. Where *made* images are concerned, the imprint of the photographer's ironic sensibility has even more potential to assert itself, and the photographer has no scruples about misleading the viewer or making a victim of the subject.

Muecke (1973:32) makes the interesting claim that the traditionally central feature of irony, namely that of a contrast between appearance and reality, is being diluted because 'most people see irony as inherent in the paradox or dilemma and not in the contrast of a true and a false picture of reality.' To the extent that a difference can be drawn between ironic situations and ironic pictures, it would be fair to say that the ideological component is best exemplified by what we call ironic situations because they appeal so essentially to shared frames of reference. In contrast, the pretence component of irony is perhaps best exemplified by ironic pictures, which are more subject to the originality of the individual's perception. Both ironic situations and ironic pictures however are irreverent, undermining and subversive of the status quo.

Finally, to what extent is an ironic viewer important in the working of irony? It has been said that irony without an audience is like one hand clapping. Irony can easily be missed but it can equally well be read into images where none was intended. There is scope both for individual differences in the perception of irony, and for changes in ironical potential over time and across context, depending in both cases on the frames of reference which one brings to bear in the interpretation of an image - or of the world. If these frames of reference are shared between photographer and viewer, the ironical intent of the photographer is more likely to be recognised and appreciated. It is possible for the photographer to suggest the frames of reference within which he wants his or

her photographs to be viewed, and this is often done by presenting work in series or by providing an accompanying text. But ultimately irony is subject to the ironic bent of the individual, whether he be the photographer or the viewer:

'A sense of irony involves not only the ability to see ironic contrasts but also the power to shape them in one's mind. It includes the ability, when confronted with anything at all, to imagine or recall or notice something which would form an ironic contrast'. (Muecke, 1973:47)

The challenge is perhaps not so much to see irony but to have others see it where we do. Where photography is concerned, this involves making images that invite others to share the irony which the photographer perceives. Where photography criticism is concerned, this involves explaining what critics mean by irony, so that not only the irony in an image, but the critical evaluation of that image, can be understood and appreciated by all.

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