

Blank, Light, Respectable, Useful: Nineteenth Century Orphan Bodies

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ABSTRACT

Discovering a scrapbook in the archives of a Victorian Orphanage raises questions as to how the children in these institutions were represented. This paper argues that such images frame a particular version of the inmates of Muller Orphan Homes, Bristol, as a collective, a 'caste apart' whose worth is displayed here as visual representations of key-circulating discourses regarding respectability, usefulness, productivity and whiteness. The photograph in question provides a striking picture of docile, servile, nimble and fit bodies; it suggests their potential to be quiet, respectable, mouldable servants, apprentices and dressmakers, neatly and seamlessly fitting their allotted economic, social and cultural space. It presents these children for the imperialist gaze, 'othered' in these photographs as both functional, servile, 'blank' docile bodies and 'spectacular' objects of lurid fascination and sentimental sympathy.


KEYWORDS

Photography; imperialism; orphanage; discourse; othering; institution; docile bodies

Introduction: Discovering the Scrapbooks

In 1836, in the cholera-ravaged, industrial city of Bristol, evangelical preacher and Prussian immigrant George Muller, charismatic co-founder of the Plymouth Brethren, started an ambitious project. He aimed to build an orphanage, through praying for funds, to show the world that 'God could provide.' Thirty years later, and apparently funded entirely from donations, Muller's vast New Orphan Homes housed between them, over two thousand orphaned children at any one time (Langmead 2006, 108).

For my doctorate, I investigated the archives of the Orphan Homes, and steadily worked my way through the institutional Admission and Dismissal Books from the 1850s until the end of the nineteenth century. Less methodically, I worked through my own challenges as an atheist, feminist, sociohistorical researcher and a foster carer, working in an institution founded, funded, and still run by evangelical Christians, who had taken in my great grandfather and his siblings in the late 1800s, and converted him, at least, to the Plymouth Brethren. Joseph Lowe, orphan no. 458, was 'a good boy'.

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Wandering through the museum, taking a break from the intense, 'strange and banal' research activity of archival annotation (Farge 2013, 16), I had come across a large scrapbook of glued-in, original photographs from the late 1800s to the 1940s, some of which I had never seen before, or had at best, seen copies of, on microfiche. This was exciting: images in the scrapbooks, it seemed to me at the time, offered a visual representation of some of the complex and confusing issues I was struggling with in my doctorate research, and offered a way in to exploring and articulating those issues.

Inside the scrapbooks, the photographs and newspaper cuttings had presumably been tacked in by a past, nameless volunteer, and were variously labelled. Photographs included formal lines of children, children at play, and other group shots. Later photographs contained single portraits, including some beautiful images of children asleep, or cheekily peering through the branches of blossom trees. Some had dates or location information, printed out then cut and pasted into the book. The books included photocopies of now seemingly lost documents listing the teaching plan for the day, and the apprentice and servant contracts, to be completed by new masters and mistresses.

Photographing inmates had become standard practice in nineteenth-century asylums, the camera regarded as a tool through which one could identify and graphically categorise particular pathologies, or eugenicist traits. Indeed, by the mid-1800s, a number of well-regarded physicians were using photography to both identify 'the strange writing on the human face' and document the apparent cure (Dahlquist and Kinderman 2023, 134).

Photography was not simply a diagnostic tool. By the mid-1850s, photographic innovations meant such imagery was more commercially viable, and not simply a luxury novelty of the rich. Large commercial photography firms were established early in the 1850s, producing photographs as postcards and individual prints, now more accessible to the middle class, as *carte-de-visites*, one of the 'most widely marketed of the new consumer goods of the nineteenth century' (Pultz 1995, 17). Cards included images of public figures, significant events, animals and wartime scenes. Photographic images of loved ones could be tucked into wallets, pockets and cigarette cases and taken to war, or across the sea by emigres. They could be framed and displayed: visual and public records of travel, achievements or family status (Newman 2012, 265). They could, like this image, be pasted into scrapbooks along with other ephemera and souvenir items such as postcards, tickets, stamps, coins and hair: a popular Victorian past time.

These scrapbooks of photographs with the old fashioned, sticky corner slots for photographs to be slotted in, and the handwritten notes or picture titles written or glued-in by past volunteers, thus represented a 'gritty palimpsest' of meanings (Wilkinson 2016, 45), a semiotic mix of studio photography archive, historical documentation and private family collections, a mix of domestic trivia, folk art and 'official' museum artefact. They were literally and metaphorically unfixed in meaning, open to interpretation in other ways than the written word, or the established museum narrative, or even the microfiched version of themselves. They were 'messy texts', evocative, ambiguous images (Reed and Speedy 2011, 107).

For the purposes of this paper, I am going to discuss one, striking photograph, of a group of girls posed half kneeling, in a light windowed room [Figure 1]. By picking a single photograph, I am creating 'an archive within an archive' (Moore, Salter, and Stanley 2020, 39). This is, therefore, a fragment, an insight, a sliver of the whole, but one which as I hope to show, represents and teases out some of my own research challenges. The photograph both literally and figuratively attempts to 'frame' the children in



Figure 1. 'A group of approximately 26 white girls aged around 10–13, in lines of 4 and 5, kneeling with their arms bent behind their heads and one leg out straight at the side, so that those with their right leg straight lean to the left and vice versa. All are looking at the camera, most are smiling. The room they are in has a bare wooden floor and light/white painted walls with three high windows just seen at top of photo. The girls all wear a dark polka dot dress under a pale neutral coloured pinafore, black tights and shoes and a head covering slightly darker than the pinafore.' Image (c) Muller's and shown here courtesy of Muller's (www.mullers.org).

particular, key ways: ways which are, as I will go on to demonstrate, ideologically entangled with the wider context of Victorian society.

Methodology

In analysing this photograph, I drew on the work of Dahlquist and Kinderman's exploration of asylum photography (2023) and Osten's work on early twentieth-century photographs from a children's hospital (Osten 2010). I also drew on Moore et al.'s approach to archival research and analysis (2020) and Sekula's work on nineteenth-century photographic representation (1981). Finally, I drew on Stoler's advice to read against the archival grain, to 'read stubbornly' the image under analysis (Stoler 2010, 44).

Osten's work focuses on a 'hidden picture library' of negatives from the Oskar-Helene Home for 'crippled' children, between 1910 and 1930 in Berlin. The aim of the institution was to turn these children into useful members of society. Like his fellow alumni George Muller a few decades earlier¹, the Oskar-Helene Home's director, scientific photography innovator and surgeon Konrad Biesalski, aimed to turn the children into 'tax payers rather than charity recipients' (Poore 2007, 8). Photographs were used both for medical evidence and investigation, and also as part of a 'carefully conceived publicity campaign' to promote the work of the hospital. Again like Muller's flyers, postcards and pamphlets promoting the

institution were widely disseminated to supporters and interested members of the public (Osten 2010). Such relatively early photography was, as Hayes et al. observe, a key component to 'evangelical fundraising, popular memorabilia and much more' (2002, 107).

Dahlquist and Kinderman's work covers a very similar timescale to the scrapbook, which contained photographs and ephemeral administrative documents from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s. Dahlquist and Kinderman argue that photography was used both to represent and catalogue and to understand and make sense of, mental health conditions, understood at the time as 'biological pathologies or phenotypes' (2023, 130) and, as I will argue of the Muller imagery, enmeshed with eugenicist ideology.

Osten's approach to analysing the hospital photographs starts by acknowledging one's immediate reaction. 'Of course', he writes, the images look 'repressive' to the modern eye, the children's expressions 'woodcut-like' (Osten 2010, 1). I similarly noted here in my journal that I had found some of the pictures featuring younger children, small, unsmiling infants standing in military-like order, hard to witness, knowing they were bereaved orphans. As a starting point, I subsequently took Warburg's advice to then 'de-demonise' the images through systematic ordering of the analysis process, to 'unravel the process of production, dissemination and reception of these images' (in Osten 2010, 2).

Process

Following Osten's approach, firstly, the contents of the photograph were systematically described, noting style, symbols and imagery, a process Moore et al. refer to as 'mapping' and 'surface reading' in order to pay 'close attention to the structure and content' of the document and consider 'what the facts are and for whom' (Moore et al. 2020, 53). These descriptions were then organised according to keywords to reveal the patterns and (in relation to other photographs) recurring themes. Next, contextual information was collected where possible, to establish how and where such photographs as this were produced and disseminated. This is a process Sekula (1981, 15) describes as 'a dance' between representations, in which we observe – somewhat aptly for this particular photograph – 'the floorboards and muscles that make this seemingly effortless movement possible'. Finally, I read relevant newspaper articles: 'goldmines of spatiotemporal data', according to Hill (1993, 74) as well as pamphlets and scientific papers, circulating around the estimated date of the photograph, noting key words and themes, in order to 'ultimately contextualise [the photograph] within scientific and socio-cultural and political discourses' (Osten 2010, 3).

Thus, the photograph analysis followed Moore et al.'s 'archival working rhythm' of reading, noting, reflections and re-reading, continually considering one's own 'sensibility' alongside identifying and analysing links and connections (2020, 63).

Through this, the analysis moves 'beyond recognising a particular [document] as interesting in itself, to frame it as part of an evolving sociohistorical picture' (Hill 1993, 64). This is not to conclude with new historical 'truths,' however. As Farge (2013, 122–123) observes, we cannot 'pin down once and for all the meaning of these documents,' but we can be open to 'the rhythm of surprises experienced when in dialogue with the archives' to produce 'gaps where certainty once reigned.' In this we can, as Sekula suggests, look at the photo as discourse acknowledging that, 'the meanings generated by photography are always incomplete, historically produced, and contextually bounded ... like any utterance' (in Edwards 1986, 546). Thus, the aim here is to provide an analysis

which challenges the certainty of the Muller narrative, enabling us to look at the museum's exhibits, from a fresh perspective.

In the Picture

With this in mind, then, a description of the photograph, noting its significant style and symbols: the photograph is black and white, featuring twenty-four or twenty-five white girls of similar age, possibly in their very early teens, in a large room. The room is bare, other than low narrow benches around the walls, and a low, two-bulb or candle-light fitting. There are three large, arched windows set high in the walls; we are just looking into the far left-hand corner of the room. The floor is bare, light-coloured wood. There looks to be signs of damp in the corner, as there are large black smudges on the wall and along the far left hand wall. The girls are kneeling on one knee with their other leg stretched out beside them, toes pointed. Their hands are behind their heads, and they are all facing the camera. The girls have shoulder-length hair, in the same swept back, fringeless style, under a small cloth bonnet shaped like a hood. They wear a sleeveless pinny of similar material (and presumably colour), which covers a dark, long-sleeved, knee-length dress with small white- or light-coloured polka dots. They wear thick black tights or stockings, and black closed-toe shoes with an ankle strap.

The girls kneel at an angle, so that their outstretched leg and their bodies form a straight diagonal. It looks like one girl, at the top left, second to back row, can only be glimpsed between the others, just her knees and pinafore skirt are visible. The girls are loosely arranged in pairs, leaning towards each other, so each girl in each pair leans on the opposite knee to 'mirror' their partner, sideways on. Most are smiling, and looking directly at the camera. Others look forward unsmilingly, into the middle distance, or down at the floor. A couple are blurred, as if shifting, in what must have been a rather uncomfortable position. The knees of the girl whose face we cannot see, are blurred, as if she has slipped down.

Moore et al. (2020, 15) warn against 'picking out the extraordinary' in archival research. These images *are* extraordinary, in their seemingly abstract, angular style, and yet they are also *typical*, in that they feature the children in staged group formations, referencing physical movement (e.g. holding exercise balls, or skipping ropes) as do the majority of the early Muller's photographs.² In this photograph, the children are positioned into almost abstract, surrealist shapes, all kneeling at an angle, with their other arm and leg stretched out.

This process of noting and reflecting lead me to consider the ways in which children's bodies here connoted both physical strength and suppleness – to stay in that pose for a Victorian camera's long exposure time takes some core strength – and unlike the individualist portraits of the asylum as examined by both Osten and Dahlquist and Kinderman, emphasised their similarity, their (pheno)types, an almost machine-like impersonality: themes which are explored further, below.

The Muller scrapbook photographs are difficult to date due to the unchanging design of the uniform, which remained as it had been since the start of the orphanage in 1830s, until a local newspaper-led campaign led to changes in design in the 1930s. Thus, this photograph could have been taken between the late 1800s, when photography became more commercially accessible, and the 1930s, before the uniform changed. In this, the analysis covers a key era in institutional photography, and chimes with Dahlquist and Kinderman's analyses of asylum photography, which similarly spans 1845–1920 (2023).

Making Pictures

Sekula (1981) argues that ‘from 1839 onward’ the practices of photography were appropriated as ‘new techniques of social diagnoses and control, to the systematic naming, categorisation and isolation of an otherness thought to be determined by biology’. As such, photography was a scientific tool as much as it was a form of aesthetic representation and new art form. As a tool for visual categorisation for scientific analysis, it was ‘hitched to the locomotive of positivism’ (1981, 15–16). Thus, photographing patients and institutional inmates, as well as ‘Others’ across the British Empire (Hall 2001), became established practice in ideologically reinforcing the scientific ‘truth’ of a eugenicist hierarchy of ‘types’ as well as mental and physical fitness. In analysing such images, as Dahlquist and Kinderman recommend, we need to ‘consider ... the context or circumstances of production and the photographer’s motive is vital in order to gain insight into what they can communicate’ (2023, 132).

The strange, angular shapes of the children, all in the same formation, the white room, brings to mind formalism, and early abstract photography of the body by artists such as Rodchenko’s ‘gymnast’ photographs from the 1930s, and the similarly formalist work of Eisenstein and Vertov, or structuralist, ‘kinetic’ art made popular in 1920s Europe by artists such as Alexander Calder. In the styling of the bodies, it equally recalls some of the Oskar-Helene hospital photographs also from the early decades of the twentieth century (Osten 2010), in which the body of the ‘disabled’ individual was treated by, or interacted with, the machine, in – to the modern eye, and to critics such as Kafka, at the time-stark and often disturbing ways.³

Equally disturbing, and possibly more pertinent to the themes of this article, the images of the girls are strikingly similar to popular 1930s images of groups of female gymnasts, such as those of the Logau School in Hannover, and the ‘League of German Girls’, a Hitler-youth movement which included collective displays of athleticism and rhythmic gymnastics by similarly identically uniformed young people, celebrating the fit, athletic, white, Aryan body.

As Sekula (1981) observes, this new technology ‘was openly harnessed to the new strategies of social ... control that characterised the mental asylum, the penitentiary and eventually ... the factory’. This new form of categorisation and surveillance became ‘a project’ drawing ‘an unmistakable line between the professional reader of the body’s signs ... and the ‘diseased’, ‘deviant’ or ‘biologically inferior’ object’ (15–18).

Interwoven into this diagnostic surveillance, is another contextual, discursive strand. In visually representing the outings, events, and gatherings of the institution, the scrapbook photographs fit with the era’s more traditional fascination with keeping visual records, and with the Victorian trend for organised pageantry (Georgiou 2018). Orphanage founder George Muller certainly liked pageantry: annually, all two thousand orphans, in identical uniforms, would parade through the city to Pur Down for a picnic celebrating Muller’s birthday. Like the era’s ‘human curiosities’ shows and circuses, popularly touring the country (Bogdan 1988), the spectacle of ‘an enormous crocodile’ of two thousand identically dressed ‘Orphs’, immediately recognisable as ‘Muller girls and boys,’ would bring the city to a standstill, as local newspapers would annually report.⁴ Photographs show the children marching along the road, with onlookers on the pavement: both groups stare curiously at each other; children run alongside the ‘orphs’, women hold their babies and view from the sidelines.

Just as with the parades, onlookers and visitors were encouraged by the institution: one could, by appointment, watch the children eat, play, learn and even sleep. These photographs were perhaps a memento of that visit or an illustration of such events for those benefactors or would-be benefactors who lived too far away to visit. As Sekula argues, in such instances, not only are such pictures literally for sale but ‘their meanings are up for grabs. New owners invited, new interpretations are promised’ (in Edwards 1986, 547).

Late nineteenth-century guidebooks and charabanc tours of Bristol, such as *Bingham’s Guide* would often include ‘world famous’ Muller’s as well as Bristol (then ‘Clifton’) Zoo, on their tours of the ‘top sights’.⁵ The mass production of these photographs means the image is not simply authoritative categorising, but also a mass produced commodity, used in different ways by different owners of the reproduction (Benjamin 2008). Thus these photographs could operate as tourist souvenirs, as scrapbook material as they were for the museum volunteer who created this, and as archival document. Such documents open up, for Moore, Salter, and Stanley (2020, 89) ‘a performative scene, a dialogic space’ where the creator of the document – in this case, a photographer – and the ‘researcher as reader’ ‘meet, interact and negotiate meaning’. Thus initial readings of the imagery of the picture and my reflections on what the picture connoted for me, enabled me to start shaping the direction of the next step in the analysis, in which I looked for further contextual information on the photograph’s production and dissemination.

Wider Discourses

The Orphan Home visits, these carefully constructed group images, and the ‘orph’ parades, provided opportunities for the city to witness and enjoy evidence of its benevolence. Such visuals, including the photograph discussed here, therefore did significant ideological work in the mid to late nineteenth century. In his analysis of the role of Queen Victoria, Plunkett suggests such events – pageants, parades and ceremonials, particularly those involving charitable institutions – were ideologically important because they satisfied both Conservative ‘reinforcement’ of tradition in the ‘midst of disorientating change’ and fulfilled the ‘radicals’ desire to see that the source of benevolence was ‘at least being put to work for its handsome remuneration’ (Plunkett 2007, 36).

In the same way, this photograph celebrates civic philanthropy in the healthy and well dressed, wholesome appearance of the children. Rhythmic gymnastic movement – with dumb bells and long ribbons – also features in similar photographs and provides visual reassurance that, in obediently demonstrating their neatness, nimbleness and fitness, the children were useful, potential ‘productive bodies’ with the potential to provide the country with good labouring, servile stock. The picture emphasises their strength: as they half stand, half kneel, smiling forward, they emphasise as Poore puts it, ‘normative ways of physical functioning’ (Poore 2007, 14).

Osten argues of his interwar photographs of ‘crippled’ children interacting with hospital equipment that the visual *motifs* available for analysis, ‘mirror ... the socially, morally and politically fragile society of post-war Germany’ (Osten 2010, 1). This charge could equally be applied to this photograph, and its existence in turbulent, late nineteenth-century England. Dahlquist and Kinderman’s asylum photographs representing individual pathologies and the Muller photographs of physical fitness as represented here are thus

the two sides of the same coin: both are visual representations of the constructed boundaries of normative fitness. To unpack this further, the following section starts to deconstruct some of these *motifs*, by drawing on key discursive themes of the era.

Blank Child

By emphasising the ‘sameness’ of the Muller orphans, in style and positioning, the photographer and institution create a composite portrait of a ‘Muller girl’, a standard type, perhaps for potential masters and mistresses looking for servants and apprentices. What is emphasised in this photograph is not the uniqueness of each child but the imposed, institutionalised similarities: the identical, regulation poses, the identical clothes and hair. They are blank canvases.

Muller’s is not the most famous of philanthropic orphanages. Four years before his visit to Muller’s, Dickens had visited Thomas Coram’s foundling hospital museum, in London, and wrote of ‘the Blank Child’ (Dickens and Wills 1853). Coram had apparently been so horrified at the sight of babies literally left on scrap heaps, that he resolved to raise subscription for the Foundling Hospital, from his wealthy connections, including Gainsborough, Handel and Hogarth (Higginbotham 2017, 57). Dickens linked the notion of the rescued ‘scrapheap’ child and the popular child psychology ideas of the day of the child as ‘tabula rasa’ with the notion of the ‘blank’ – a reference to the initial form an applicant completed, in which they would complete the blank section of ‘A – Child’ with ‘boy’ or ‘girl’. Playing on the idea that such children, taken in at such an early age, offered the institution the opportunity to mould the child, to ‘wipe the slate clean’, as well as the institution’s routine of changing a child’s name on arrival, Dickens writes of ‘blank children ... trained out of their blank state, to be useful entities in life’ (Dickens and Wills 1853, 53).

As Cunningham argues, ‘It was better to be an orphan than poor’ in the early nineteenth century. The very ‘blankness’ of an orphan’s past, unlike the street child, ‘contained the possibility of social legitimacy’ (Cunningham 1991, 21). ‘Blankness’ was more respectable than poverty, because it allowed for the possibility of a new identity, and freedom from the ties of poor genetic inheritance – one of Muller’s biographers writes of orphanage arrivals as ‘thoroughly permeated by the poison of bad blood’ which could be ‘renovated’ through ‘moral and spiritual’ institutional discipline (Pierson 1899, 226).

Thus once renovated, the ‘blank’ child of the orphanage is ready to be saved, disciplined and moulded, raw stock processed in factory like conditions. A standard must be reached, one which meets the requirements of the Muller brand. A blank child is an ideal servant: housemaids in particular had to be not only blank and silent but invisible, ‘below stairs’, their work done before the family rose for the day. Like footmen, servants were usually given generic names (May 1998). So orphan no. 457 for example, may become ‘Mary’ as an adult, and might never use her given family name. Thus, the children in this photograph are notable not for their genetic uniqueness or individual ailments, but for their institutionalised sameness, their standardised fitness. Unlike the ways in which old photographs of family members ‘sediment ... meaning’ and reinforce ‘continuities of family’ (Hayes, Silvester, and Hartmann 2002, 133), there are no distinguishing features, no genetic similarities for future generations to recognise and to which they can relate. A standard is reached, a standard blank template is constructed and displayed here *en masse*, the institution’s mass produced, branded commodity.

Light Child

In this particular photograph, the children's bodies and the implied abilities and strength of those bodies are the focus of the picture: there are no domestic details, or individualist elements. Unlike the asylum, it's about what they can *do*, not who they are. The whiteness of the walls, the light emphasises the recurring shapes of the bodies.

Light, and whiteness, were symbols of health in the nineteenth century. Light and air were 'life giving' for a 'healthfully developed bodily structure' as doctors and advocates of new scientific innovations claimed (Sheehan 2011, 92). Even the light-giving 'blue glass' of photographic technology was seen as potentially health giving in the latter decades of the nineteenth century: 'panes curing pains'; a blue glass bathe would 'cure the blues' (93). Such lights were also used to whiten the skin tones where deemed necessary in turn of the century US photography. In the UK, the design of photography studios, dependent on much natural light, was suggested by physicians in 1860 as a possible 'phototherapeutic' remedy for 'children of the scrofulous tendency', given the power of light on such skin conditions (101).

Whiteness and light thus symbolised desirable, lightness, whiteness and health. Certainly, *Bingham's Guide to Bristol* approvingly describes the astonishing 'snowy whiteness' of the institution's linen, matched only by the 'whiteness of the whitewashed walls'.⁶ It may well be describing this room in the picture when it talks of 'spacious, lofty, light, airy' rooms, almost too austere in its 'monotony of cleanliness', its spotless 'well scrubbed', surfaces (Jennings 1872, 146). Muller's biographer William Harding describes the appearance of the orphanage as 'of . . . spotless cleanliness and . . . always bathed in light' (1914, 219). The photographer here makes the most, it could be surmised, of the bright light, the illumination of the whitewash: this room is very light: there are only faint shadows, the light from the windows is bleached and bright.

In contrast, darkness symbolised the opposite: dirt, and diseases of poverty such as scrofula, and worse. In 1890, the Founder of the salvation Army, William Booth, drew on Darwinian notions of 'swamp life' to talk of the 'submerged poor', writing that: 'Darkest England like Darkest Africa reeks with malaria. The foul and fetid breath of our slums is almost as poisonous as that of the African swamp . . .' (in Richardson 2003, 25). Four decades before, in the 1850s, reformers had campaigned for public baths for the 'filthy bodies . . . of the poor', a sympathetic stance that did little to allay popular perceptions of 'filthy beggars' who brought filth, squalor and disease onto themselves, unlike 'clean and decent' people of the 'respectable poor' and middle classes (Koven 2004, 40).

Thus, lightness and whiteness are emphasised, to promote the notion of health and wholesomeness, these children are white, and they are healthy, their bodies are able. Notably, the light bleaches their faces to give a uniform whiteness of skin tone; these are not the problematic 'Street Arabs' to use the colloquial, nineteenth-century term for destitute street children with its connotations of dirt, darkness and racist colonialism, nor have they the scrofulous 'skin eruptions [which] distinguish the institutionalised child' (Heywood 1959, 71). These large windows connote sunlight, fresh air and openness, implying these children are free of the 'dark diseases' and dark existences of Victorian poverty. Given Victorian slum reformers' concerns around dirt and decency, and the mid-nineteenth-century Employment Commissioners' concerns around young working girls in factories – 'the blackness and dirt' which can 'scarcely fail to undermine . . . their

modesty and self respect' (Royston Pike 1967, 207) – the whiteness also, notably, emphasises feminine wholesomeness, virginity, clean, blank, white purity.

Respectable Child

Semiotically, the white floor and walls and bright windows are contrasted by the dark clothing covering the children's limbs, which help give the picture its stark, angular theme.

This respectable clothing is also a significant signifier of Victorian class hierarchies. As Steedman notes, for nineteenth-century girls, 'access to any public place was severely curtailed if [one] lacked the outward show of decent clothing' (1987, 11). Indeed, one could not even enter church if 'inadequately dressed' as the Rev. John Johns noted with concern for the poorest of his Liverpool parish in the mid-1800s (Simey 1992, 38). Similarly, Henry Mayhew, in his descriptions of street children, notes that all children wore clothes 'never made for the wearers' – ragged, adult clothing. He describes 'the most disgusting parts' of a child prostitute's appearance: 'their foul and matted hair ... the broken and filthy boots and stockings, which they seem never to button or to garter', and goes on to quote a nine-year-old street seller, who says she has 'been to church five or six times in my life. I should go oftener and so would mother, if we had clothes' (Mayhew 1861, 480).

In contrast, Muller girls and boys were given a set of clothes on leaving the institution, a uniform of dark colours, decent and respectable, plain, 'clean and neat.' Buttoned up, custom made, generally deemed suitable for a servant or apprentice as they are in this picture (May 1998, 10).

Whilst such outfits – fitted out for the outside world – enabled vital access to church and work, servants' uniform clothing 'reduced them to a fixed identity and social class'. Louvier's description of the typical outfit for maids-of-all-work, for example, could equally describe the uniform in this picture: a 'print dress with a cap and a rough apron' ready to be employed by 'the middle and lower middle classes' (Louvier 2020, 1).

'Maids of all work' were lower class servants. A common problem as the Coram Institute found, was that orphan and workhouse girls struggled to be 'lady's maids', so unused were they to the relatively small, domestic kitchen, or delicate, 'lady's fabrics (May 1998, 10). Such 'raw girls', unused to the lifestyles of 'educated people', therefore tended to be employed by artisanal, lower middle class families, who needed no more than housemaids and 'good plain cooks' (Royston Pike 1967, 160) as the Muller Dismissal Books also suggest, in the list of the girls' destinations.

Raw and plain, but nevertheless, still respectable. Like Muller's photographer, and operating around the late 1800s (although considerably younger than Muller, his mentor) Thomas John Barnardo was certainly aware of the semiotic significance of respectable clothing in photographs. Barnardo was a keen user of the photographic image in his own work with orphaned children.

However, in 1877, both Barnardo and his photographer of 'street children', Oscar Rejander were both involved in a somewhat murky court case, in which the two were accused of faking some elements of the photographs. It was claimed that the men had insisted on ripping the clothes of the street children even further, to emphasis their wretchedness, and in order to make a more dramatic 'after' photograph to accompany this 'before' image. In his compelling account of the case, Koven points out Barnardo,

ever the publicist, may also have been aware of the 'erotic power of the not-quite-naked child' (Koven 2004, 118). This is pertinent given how contemporary Lewis Carroll's popular Victorian images of a similarly ragged, near-naked Alice Liddell and other prepubescent girls, were similarly the subject of scandal in the 1870s. Biographer Bakewell notes for example that Carroll's publisher dissuaded the author from inserting a request in later copies of *Alice*, asking little girl readers to send him *cartes* of themselves (1996, 185). Adding to the controversy of the Barnardo court case, was the fact that Rejander was Darwin's chosen photographer, to provide the new and respectable photographic evidence for *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, first published 1872 (Pultz 1995).

The Scrapbook photograph here is likely to have come into being after Barnardo's controversial images of the 1870s, and Carroll's similarly contentious photographs. Indeed, the determinedly plain, uniform outfits of the girls, covering their heads and limbs, emphasise their respectability. The focus here is not on the female body as vulnerable. The positioning of the fully clothed girls in rigid gymnastic exercise appears to aim to avoid any erotic connotations. Perhaps also, their outline is so rigidly angled, the straight line between foot and shoulder so emphasised, as to avoid implications of young womanly curves, or comparisons with the infamous images of the prepubescent female body.

Interestingly, Barnardo is still largely unproblematically celebrated for his philanthropic work, and such pictures remain widely circulated. Both Lewis Carroll and Oscar Rejander were celebrated as Victorian pioneers of art photography in a recent National Portrait Gallery exhibition.⁷ Ironically, just as Barnardo followed Muller's teaching, Muller's institution follows Barnardo's marketing strategies, in still using Rejander's image in their promotional literature.⁸ Rejander's images remain the stereotypical image of a street urchin.

Useful Child

In the case of the Oskar-Helene hospital in Berlin, the photographs uncovered by Osten and his team were largely used for promotional purposes, where such images emphasised the children's healthy lifestyles, a celebration of scientific and welfare innovation.

Biesalski used such images to emphasise the potential usefulness of the children. Rather than be singled out, such young people (and disabled war veterans) should, the popular thinking went, merge into the masses, as if nothing had happened, to fit seamlessly in whenever possible (Poore 2007). Again, a 'blank canvas', with the emphasis on sameness, standards and fitness.

Here in this photograph, similar to those of Oskar-Helene, the children's physicality is a photographic reminder that with the right sort of philanthropic benevolence, children can be shaped, and moulded, to 'fit' society. They may not *be* 'us', as after all, we are the benevolent and approving viewer, but they will certainly be able and willing to *serve* us: they can be fit for purpose, they know their place, they are, to quote Dickens again, 'useful entities.' They are also useful commodities, in that they are potentially, housemaids, maids-of-all-work, kitchen maids, cooks or nursery maids, the main Muller occupations.

The child as blank, light, respectable and useful can be mapped onto nineteenth-century discourses of the 'good servant'. A 'good servant', states an 1873 poem, for example, is 'sober honest and discreet ... clean and neat'. A good servant will 'scrub

well the floors and make them white', with a 'noiseless step and watchful eye' (in May 1998, 10). An 1873 review of women's labour concluded a housemaid 'works harder' than factory or shop girls (Royston Pike 1967, 163). However, such toughness could be problematic. A 1909 article satirically defined the "'foundling temper" ... proverbially said of domestic servants [from] ... the Foundling Hospital' (Redding Ware 1909) a problem similarly found in comic accounts of 'the servant problem' by Thackeray, Cruickshank and Mayhew (May 1998).

It is notable then that Dickens' 'Blank Child' is sent off with instructions to be 'honest, careful, laborious and diligent' to work 'soberly and carefully' (1853, 52). One had to be fit, tough, but biddable. The ability to noiselessly and efficiently step through the house, even when carrying buckets of coal or water, is important: one child in the Muller institute is deemed too 'flat footed' for a placement; another is 'too small'. Another simply 'offensive' in her odour.

This is the era, it must be noted, across nineteenth-century Europe, that 'the cult of health and beauty associated with the life reform movement ... flourished ... serving in many ways to create a hostile atmosphere towards those viewed as ill, disabled or ugly' (Poore 2007, 3).

It is to these wider issues that the final sections of this article now turn.

Bigger Picture?

So, how can we sum up the ideological work this picture does? How does it represent social moral and political fragility and concerns of nineteenth-century society?

Photography was invented in the politically turbulent nineteenth century, and as this paper has already argued, is implicated ideologically in wider discourses of the Imperialist, Eurocentric culture of Victorian England. Photography is not an innocent tool for recording facts but rather an active means by which society represents itself. It creates a viewer and a way of seeing, immersed in the flow of 'traffic' of meanings, from early psychology and eugenicist thinking to the processes of mass consumerism (Sekula 1981, 15). It represents here, capitalist productivity, in which the body is valued for its productivity, its machine-like abilities, and its ideal: the 'standardised and interchangeable' worker (Guery and Deleule 2014, 99).

As Pultz writes of nineteenth-century ethnographic photography,

The very precision and clarity achieved in this glass-negative print plays a role in the production of "otherness," in that it allows the eye to savour the strangeness of skin tones, facial features, clothing ... like alien specimens, their entire bodies fully in sight and surrounded by a broad space which positions the viewer at a safe, objective distance from them (Pultz 1995, 23).

The Muller's photographer here could be similarly described, as a particular 'way of seeing,' as portraying the children with scientific detachment as specimens, as standard, docile bodies, as 'the other' (Hall 2001).

Carrett's photography firm, to which many of these photographs are ascribed, operated, like many others in that fashionable area of the city, near the recently opened Zoo, Museum and Art Gallery. Carrett's sold photographs of the Empire, its flora and fauna, its exotic animals and peoples, available as postcards and individual prints,

alongside the popular commission portraiture, the *cartes des visites*. As Putz writes, nineteenth-century Europeans deployed photographic albums for the fetishistic collecting, controlling, and defining of the bodies of native inhabitants of newly colonized lands, which were 'reduced to stereotype' (1995, 24).

Such pictures were often commissioned by academics such as T.H Huxley, President of the UK Ethnological Society (and follower of Darwin), who commissioned a series of photographs of the 'various races of men comprehended within the British Empire,' in 1869 (24). In the 1870s, Francis Galton (Darwin's cousin), who defined eugenicism as 'practical Darwinism', attempted to use photography as a way of categorising (and thus controlling) the 'biological quality of the race' (Richardson 2003, 3). Galton photographed individuals, forming combination portraits of them by printing several negatives on top of each other, so that some sort of visual average or type would emerge. By this means he attempted to form what he called 'composite portraits of the Jewish type' (Pultz 1995, 24) as well as 'types' liable to certain illnesses, such as the 'Pthisical' type. Phthisis, a form of tuberculosis, was a frequent cause of parental death in poorer areas of the city, and institutionalised children were often described as having 'phthisical roses' in their cheeks, an unnaturally high colour. The push to create and catalogue types are described in Hayes et al. 's accounts of Victorian Europeans' pictures of Namibian people: 'their subjects were constituted as collectives, representing generic groups with generic qualities. Anonymity or poor identification was the rule' (2002, 13).

This was not simply scientific discourse: the controversial study of 'phrenology' – the study of the cranium as indicative of character and abilities – was, as author and phrenologist James Carson (1868) declared, the 'only science in direct harmony with ... Evangelical Christianity.' Phrenology, Carson argued, was 'invaluable' to a teacher who could thus 'measure exactly the capacity of the children ... committed to his care' and equally identify 'those who are not naturally fitted' for education – avoiding time wasting 'vexations' (1868, xiv). Thus this is not the case of 'religion versus rationalism' as the nineteenth century is often characterised. Phrenology could identify God's work in identifying 'God's chosen people', to use a Plymouth Brethren expression, or at least, identify the favoured races. Carson for example compared the heads of Sir Walter Scott, an 'idiot,' and a 'hindoo', concluding with the latter that, 'a nation of this description has no chance of competing with the British' (456–457).

Hayes et al. note that European colonialism, along with religious and scientific discourses, 'became deeply implicated in metropolitan processes of mechanisation of visual production' in the late nineteenth century. Religion, science, colonisation and imperialism, and the 'visualisation of the other,' were therefore operating in what they describe as 'tangled layers' (2002, 107). Thus a particular 'gaze' was encouraged here by the popular commercialised *cartes* which 'othered' both foreign cultures and domestic outcasts.

Such imagery was supported by (and helped reinforce the themes within) Victorian journalistic accounts of the urban poor. Dickens' *Night Walks* and the writing of campaigners such as James Greenwood, Charles Mayhew and William Stead, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, describe their 'slumming' encounters with the urban poor as if adventures into foreign lands, creating – given the public furor which followed such stories – a 'new style of journalism' focussing on real-life scandal and 'sordid facts' (Koven 2004, 51). The notion of the urban poor as somehow, foreign and strange, was summarised in *The Saturday Review*, 1864, which described the London poor as: 'a caste apart, a race of whom

we know nothing, whose lives are of quite a different complexion from ours, persons with whom we have no point of contact' (in Richardson 2003, 23).

Certainly, in the early 1900s, eugenicist concerns and the rise of Hitler put paid to the work of the Oscar-Helene Hospital, which was put under SS control in 1933 (Osten 2010). But that is not to say that the Muller institution was overtly eugenicist in its words and practice. Rather, it is suggested that those working in an era were operating in 'complex historical and cultural circumstances' (Koven 2004, 284).⁹ These circumstances are identified here as enmeshed in imperialist and eugenicist ideologies, of which nineteenth-century positivist psychology and photography were mobilised to make sense.

Characters such as Muller, Biesalski, Barnardo, Rejander, Mayhew and the photographer of these photographs, were individuals drawing on particular ideological notions – benevolence, philanthropy, religion, class, colonialism, health, gender and education – in order to make sense of their institutional values and the day to day worlds within those institutions. Individuals whose altruism and activism collided with their pre-conceptions and bigotry are subsequently available for analysis, through close, critical observation of the *motifs* in this photograph.

Such images as this, are, inevitably, 'unpredictable' when 'brought out of the archive', due to 'the messy contingency of the photograph, which means that neither the purpose behind the photographs – nor their readings – can be reduced to the inevitable, the instrumental or the functional' (Hayes, Silvester, and Hartmann 2002, 111). Thus, whilst in analysis, the story of the photograph remains an ongoing conversation between photographer, archivist and researcher.

Nevertheless, it is argued here that the photograph frames a particular version of philanthropic benevolence, capitalist efficiency, individual 'decency' and tourist spectacle. The photograph represents Muller and his benefactors as saviours. It provides a striking picture of docile, servile, nimble and fit bodies, and it suggests their potential to be quiet, respectable, mouldable servants, apprentices and dressmakers, neatly and seamlessly fitting their allotted economic, social and cultural space. It suggests by implication and apposition, the more murky fates these girls could have suffered were they not brought into the light.

The image is determinedly un-erotic, about the body-as-functional, not displayed for desire. Perhaps most significantly, it presents these children for the imperialist, positivist gaze, to be both categorised, and commodified. Like the inmates of the asylum and the workhouse, which were also on the Bristol tour, and like the subjects on display in the zoo, and in the galleries, near the photographer's studio, the children of Muller's orphanage are 'othered' in these photographs. As in the imperial classifications of the similarly 'Othered' subjects of the British Empire (Stoler 2010), these girls are themselves a tribe, a mass collective of 'Orphs,' a 'caste apart'. They are on the one hand, functional, servile, 'blank' docile bodies to be labelled and ordered in the Dismissal Books, and on the other, in the pageants and postcards, more spectacular objects of lurid fascination and sentimental sympathy. They are the epitome of that Victorian idiom: they are children – young women – to be seen, categorised, measured, but not heard.

Notes

1. Muller was a fellow Prussian philanthropist, and fellow alumni, of the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg, Saxony-Anhalt, Germany.

2. More of these images can be seen on the Muller's website: <https://www.mullers.org>.
3. Kafka had visited a similar hospital in Prague, and Osten claims that Kafka's *Penal Colony* (1914) is 'clearly influenced by his having witnessed the machinery for treating disabled children and soldiers' (2010, 14).
4. A typical newspaper account describes 'the annual parade ... an army of little ones' setting off for Pen Pole Hill, Bristol: 'Mr Muller's great family ... over two thousand ... [a] spectacle ... most novel and extraordinary ... so vast a school' (Western Daily Press 16th August 1873).
5. See 'Third Walk' in Henry Jennings (1872).
6. An advertisement in *Myra's Journal of Dress & Fashion* 'for 'Leather-Make Scoured Calico' notes in capitals that it is 'CHEAPER, WASHES A BEAUTIFUL WHITE, AND RETAINS ITS WHITENESS' and is thus ideal for 'Orphanages, Homes and Charitable Institutions, unequalled' (*Myra's Journal of Dress & Fashion* Mon Jan 1st 1877).
7. <https://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/victorian-giants/exhibition>.
8. See for example, Clive Langmead's *Robber of the Cruel Streets: the Prayerful Life of George Muller*, published by the Evangelical publishers, Crusade for World Revival (2006).
9. As Koven observes in his account of nineteenth-century 'slum benevolence', 'conceptualising the past in terms of heroes or villains, saints and sinners ... does not ... make for very good history'. Instead, Koven argues we should see such individuals as working in complex and challenging situations of often 'ethical ambiguity' (Koven 2004, 284).

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Muller's Museum for access to their archives and Steve Ward and two anonymous reviewers of an earlier draft of this article for their insightful and informative comments.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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