

Images and the Social World: stereotypes, objectification and propaganda

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Walking through a city, watching the news, or scrolling through social media, we see a lot of images. Public images are partly a reflection of occurrences in the world, and the values of the society which displays them. However, they can also be biased or objectionable. They can over-represent regularities in line with social stereotypes or display content only favourable to those in power. For instance, media images disproportionately represent women cleaning and men as professionals, while many public statues depict oppressive historical figures (GMMP 2020, Lai 2020).

It is important to understand how images and other visual media influence us, as the number of images we encounter continues to rise, and people are increasingly choosing to engage with image-based media over text (Guilbeault 2024; Zhang and Rui 2013). Back in 1864, Frederick Douglass, the philosopher and abolitionist, was acutely aware of the influence that public images can have. In discussing the commercialisation of the daguerreotype, he stated: “Of all things, the mental atmosphere surrounding us is not easily moved in this or that direction. [However], it is evident that the great cheapness and universality of pictures must exert a powerful though silent influence upon the ideas and sentiment of the time, present and future generations.”

My thesis aims to expand on Douglass’s insights, using the philosophy of cognitive science and psychology to understand the visual manifestations of stereotypes, objectification and propaganda. Philosophers tend to focus on their linguistic manifestations, such as analysing stereotypes expressed in language (Beegly 2015) or treating objectifying images as speech acts (Langton 1993). I aim to supplement these accounts by contributing an account that focuses on images.