

SAY NO TO NEGATIVES

A Call for Correctness

By Bill Jay

It is rare indeed to discover kindred spirits in the increasingly arcane fields of pure science, but I have gained an instant liking and respect for Gordon Videen who is in the Physics Department of Dalhousie University. In a recent periodical* he castigates Benjamin Franklin for assigning the electron a negative charge rather than a positive one. Franklin thought the choice an arbitrary one and never considered its future implications, but "in all this time", says Videen, "no one has ever really considered the feelings of the electron and how they would react to being called 'negative'. That their behavior might actually change to fit the label was never considered. Stereotyping and prejudices naturally resulted."

I agree, naturally. Being a New Age sensitive person of the male persuasion, imbued with the righteous tenets of Political Correctness, these words have inspired me to call for a pure and thorough uprooting of all such humiliating words in photography. (I know what you are thinking: the trendiness of the PC movement and therefore the likelihood of bountiful funding for my project spurs my crusading zeal. And I indignantly respond: So what?).

The obvious place to start this witchhu... sorry, this campaign of correctness is the most offensive term of all, "negative", especially as it was introduced by Herschel, who is automatically guilty, being a DWEM (Dead White European Male). No excuses - the fact that he lived before the Great Age of Academic Enlightenment is not relevant. Anyway, no wonder our field is dominated by judgmental, imperialistic and paternalistic semiotics. We should be ashamed that such a term as "negative" is so casually and commonly bandied around and I, for one, intend to do something about it.

I will start with a question. Ponder it. How would you like to be called "No"? I thought not. Such people cannot be blamed if they grow up wearing their sister's knickers or thinking that bumper stickers are a political philosophy. So imagine the latent resentment of the photographic negative that has lived for over 150 years with such a biased, degrading and humiliating name. Clearly, sensitivity training (photographers fondling developed film) will be mandatory in order to restore some measure of respect and self-esteem to the negative. Who knows what damage has been done already to its psyche

due to unsavory labeling, and who knows what vengeance it justly perpetuates on our images due to its humiliation? The preponderance of scratches of mysterious origin might very well have their genesis in our own bias and cruelty - and this demonstration of retaliation and righteous indignation is to be applauded. Scratches and sundry debris are revolutionary gestures of the oppressed! Think about it.

I am well aware that there are photographers reading these words who *are* thinking about it and what they are thinking is this: the negative is an insentient object and cannot feel shame or disgrace. And I respond: how do you know? There is no scientific evidence to support this contention! Anyway, this is retrograde, reactionary thinking and can be dismissed because we are now dealing with more profound matters than reality.

Admittedly photographers are aware of their insensitivity at a subconscious level. Hence they often withdraw from the indiscriminate use of the word "negative" by abbreviating it to "neg." However honorable the intent, *this is not a viable alternative*. Indeed it compounds the problem because it broadens the range of unsavoury connotations. Remember, "neg." is the beginning of neglect, negligent, negligible, negate, negro and negligee - implying the photographer's obsession with denial and disapproval as well as race and sex.

Clearly the terms "negative" and "neg." must be expunged from the photographic lexicon. Their replacements will need to be discussed at our sensitivity seminar/ovular but I offer a few suggestions to get the balls (if you'll excuse me) rolling.

My first idea was "Proto-positive", or "propo" for short. This is a good substitute for negative because the prefix "proto" means "giving rise to" a positive. On second thoughts, however, it is not PC enough for me because it does not acknowledge past prejudices and draw attention to the negative's minority status. For this reason "Differently-Abled Densities" is better. But we must be careful with its abbreviation. You might be watching a youngster develop a roll of film and as he examines the strip inadvertently ask: "How's your DAD?" Warning: some young photographers do not have fathers, at least those that pay child support, so

this question could be considered discriminatory, rightly so, and lead to an Affirmative Action lawsuit.

No, the best I can come up with is: Correctly Light-Acquired Proto-positive. It has a nice ring to it, although it does occur to me that the previous question would now become: "How's your Clap?"

We all need to don our PC thinking caps in order to build a more compassionate foundation for our art and, like our films, become more sensitive.

A clear demonstration of the efficacy - and practical benefits - of correct language is verified by our conversations about the print. We refer to this as a "positive", and therefore imbue the image with a sense of self-worth, a nurturing spirit and cultural diversity. We are appreciative; it is grateful. It is no surprise, therefore, that the positive print takes pride in being publicly exhibited (but that the negative is shamefully hidden away in dark files where no one else, but guilty us, will ever see them). What, then, are the manifestations of the politically correct positive print? Many.

For example, we expect blacks and whites to live in harmony in a photograph joined by their progeny, grey tones, which are encouraged to proliferate as widely as possible. This is desegregation at its finest. As Robert Frank once wrote: "Black and white are the colors of photography." He did not say: "White is the color of photography, but a few blacks are occasionally tolerated." No- blacks and whites, *equally*.

Important, too, is the fact that we never refer to gender about these tones which means that sexism is completely absent. How absurd it would be to mention male whites or female blacks! This is a heartening affirmation of PC principles. But there's more.

Socio-economic differences do not play a role in our pure PC print. Indeed, if we say that the print does not have any rich blacks it is in a tone (pun intended) of disapproval. We *like* rich blacks, with the same fervor that we disapprove of degraded whites.

In spite of these heartening PC attitudes we need constant vigilance especially when critiquing poor quality prints or, as I would prefer to say, prints of quality potential. Never say, for example, that "the tones in this print are muddy." They are richness impaired. Be careful when pointing out that the image is flat or harsh, both derogatory terms likely to cause offense. It is satisfactory to mention that its tones are differently-abled. Similarly never, ever state that the picture is "bad" when, in fact, it is visually challenged.

As you are all aware, or should be, one of the no-no's of PC is Lookism, making judgements based on appearance. Do not make personal comments about the image, such as: "there are a lot of spots on the face of this print." Instead, gently advise "the localised application of a systematic pigmented hand-gesture as part of the ongoing arting process."

It is not my intention to provide you with a complete dictionary of correctness - you can make this up, just like everyone else - but I hope I have provided a few of the important principles. There is one last admonition concerning a particularly offensive term. Lots of different colors are multicultural and therefore PC. They are to be encouraged (unless working in black and white) as long as you make sure that each hue has an equal opportunity to display itself, otherwise it will become necessary to assign quotas. But back to the offensive term. Your results are *not* color photographs. They are photographs of color. I am sure you understand. (If you do, I too would like to know. Explanations, with biological samples, can be sent to me c/o Woman's Caucus, KGB).

As you can see, there is a lot of work remaining before the field of photography eradicates all those politically incorrect terms. Hope is on the horizon. Perhaps these issues will be solved automatically now that we are discarding the negative and switching to electronic imagery. But then we introduce the problem of negatively charged electrons. Don't we?

*"A Call for Scientific Correction," *Journal of Irreproducible Results* , Vol. 38, No. 6,
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