

Spare Rib's radical stance and innovative ideas.

What are the techniques used by Spare Rib on its front pages to catch the reader's eye and raise awareness on the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s?

[Yellow highlighting = language problem.]

The Women's Liberation Movement in the UK in the 1970s took a massive turn towards women's emancipation. The first National Joint Action Committee for Women's Equal Rights was set up in 1969, and organized a demonstration for the demand of equal pay for women. Two feminist magazines were created: *Spare Rib* and *Women's voice*. *Spare Rib* demonstrated a more intellectual style of analysis than *Women's Voice*, and was established by feminists who had been part of socialist organizations. In its desire to explore women's issues on a broad spectrum, from focusing on social issues to the place of women in art, but also by shedding light on race issues and on women from minority groups, *Spare Rib* preserved its highly radical stance on women's issues and attempted to raise awareness on women's oppression in society. Its eye-catching front pages **highly contributed** to attracting the readers' interest. With a large variety of images and of topics **at stake**, the *Spare Rib* front pages¹ illustrated the radical stance of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s. Our interest will therefore be set on the different techniques used on the *Spare Rib* front pages in order to create this eye-catching effect. We will first focus on the techniques and the play on contrasts used to catch the reader's attention. We shall then explore the artistic and aesthetic dimension of the *Spare Rib* front pages in order to highlight its contribution not only to women's social issues but also to women's place in the artistic field, which also explored the challenges of women's emancipation. We will eventually move on to the radical stance of *Spare Rib* and the unconventional topics illustrated in its front pages, in order to underline its broad definition of feminism and its concern for all categories of women.

1) Eye-catching techniques and a play on contrasts

¹ Links to the different Spare Rib issues **at stake** in this argumentation are provided at the end of this essay. They are listed in the order in which they are examined in this essay.

The front page of the October 1972 issue of *Spare Rib* is eye-catching in the way it generates emotions in the reader's mind and appeals to our sense of empathy. It stages two photographs of a toddler juxtaposed with the title "Here she is at 2 – at 20 she's on heroin" situated on the right of the top picture and above the bottom picture, as the bottom picture is tilted to the right, and the top picture is aligned on the left. In both pictures, the toddler, a little girl, is photographed in a garden or a backyard, with flowers behind her. In the top photograph, she is looking down to her right, innocently hiding her face from the photographer behind her hair. She is wearing a grey ribbon in her hair and a grey romper or a dress, there is no bright colour in the picture apart from the bright red flowers behind her. In the bottom photograph she is standing in front of large rocks with bushes of flowers above, she is wearing a pink dress, the colour of which is emphasised as the rest of the picture is black and white. In this picture, her face is more visible; she is smiling – or forcing a smile – at the photographer. This front page is arranged in a way which makes it look like the page of a family photo album; the bottom left corner, the top right and top left corners of the photograph at the top are represented as if they were inserted in the page, in a way that emphasizes the likeness to a photo album. This idea conveys the impression of intimacy, which creates a link with the reader's own personal life, with the intimacy of the reader who can easily identify his/her own family photo albums with the front page of the magazine. This technique of representation is all the more effective as it is complementary to the title: "Here she is at 2 – at 20 she's on heroin" The second photograph is represented as tilted. In fact, it seems to be almost falling from the page, in a declining movement, which refers to the eventual decline of the little girl's life, since, as the title suggests, she is presented as becoming addicted to heroin. The calming aspect of the colours of the greyish/mauve background and the yellow title – both colours evoking the softness and innocence of childhood – is contrasted with brighter and more alarming elements. In the top photograph, the bright red colour of the flowers behind the little girl evoke something alarming, they almost look like stains of blood, which breaks with the soothing aspect of the other colours. The contrast between the innocence of the child represented in the photographs and the appalling, scandalous title about heroin use attracts the reader's attention. The editorial choice of showing a child obviously appeals to the gaze of parents, which reinforces the eye-catching aspect of the front page. The likeness to a family photo album raises the idea that heroin use can affect any child as if to say, "this can be your child," which is a very effective way of requiring the reader's attention and implication.

A similar technique is used on the front page of the January 1975 issue of *Spare Rib*, which displays the photograph of a group of women who seem to be part of a union, as the corresponding title indicates: "Union Officials Betray These Women." The black and white photograph is covering the full page. It shows a group of women gathered in an exterior area. A group of women at the front is taking part in a conversation, while other women at the back are also having conversations. In total, seventeen women can be seen in the picture. However, none of them are facing the photographer apart from the woman in the middle, yet she is not looking at the camera. The photograph is taken from an external point of view. The title which corresponds to the photograph, situated on the middle right part of the front page is in bright red, which indicates anger, but also the idea of an emergency, as the colour red is usually a symbol of anger, but also of danger and of something forbidden, which reinforces the evocative choice of this colour. The three bottom titles are in bold red and pink, as to maintain the link with the main title, and to preserve the feminine stance of the magazine. The women in the picture do not seem to be bothered by or to even pay attention to the camera, three women are looking in the same direction, at something which is not part of the picture, and all the women in the photograph look busy and almost upset. The woman in the centre of the picture is talking to other women, she is facing the camera and holding a cigarette in her hand. These women are **common** women, they are not particularly dressed or arranged to appeal to the male gaze, as opposed to what could be expected from women on the front page of the magazine. This editorial choice underlines the radical stance of the magazine by breaking with a tradition of magazines that appeal to the male gaze by fetishizing women. Here, the fact that these women are pictured as they are, with no make up and no fancy clothes, sets the focus not on their physical appearances but on the real issue at stake, which is a women's strike for equal pay in Heywood. All women whose faces are visible look preoccupied. The fact that the conversation between several women is taking centre stage on the front page calls for the reader's participation in this debate. It seeks to attract the reader's attention and, as the camera is situated behind the women who are talking, it is easy for the reader to picture him/herself taking part in the conversation with the women in the picture. It looks as if the photographer wants the viewer to engage in this discussion. Here again, this front page is effective in attracting the reader's attention by requiring his/her participation in the discussion about the women's strike. The eye-catching bold red main title in accordance with the title of the magazine, contrasted with the black and white photograph emphasizes the urgency of the situation; the photograph itself invites the reader to participate and get involved in the discussion between the women who are represented.

The front page of the *Spare Rib* issue from September 1976 carries out a play on contrasts and the magazine's desire to appeal to the reader's sympathy. Its title: "Why could one of these women lose custody of her child?" with "LESBIAN MOTHERS IN COURT" written in capital letters accentuates the urgent dimension of the situation. The flashy pink background contrasts with the titles and the photograph in black and white. On the photograph, we can see three children at the front, and three women behind them, the photograph is cut along the edges of the persons' bodies, in a child-like manner, as to emphasize the aesthetic dimension of the cover and leave more space to the pink colour to invade the picture. The rest of the picture is also cut out in order to give more importance to the bodies of the mothers and children represented, emphasizing the human-centred dimension of the cover. The three women are presented as the mothers of the children in front of them through the question in the title "why would one of these women lose custody of her chil" which is addressing the reader directly. The rhetorical question suggests that either one of the three women in the picture is lesbian or that the three of them are, which lays the emphasis on the idea that a lesbian woman cannot be distinguished from a straight woman. This title therefore emphasizes the absurd dimension of the in the woman's loss of custody of her child, as the children and their mothers are represented smiling and laughing, suggesting that there is no reason for the mothers to lose the custody of their children. Moreover, as regards their physical appearances, these women are wearing dresses and flowery shirts, which goes against and refutes stereotypes on lesbian women as masculine or as tomboys. Their feminine haircuts also show that these women are not different from straight women. As to the children, they are close to their mothers, each children is positioned in front of his/her mother. The focus is set on the smile of the children and of their mothers, which accentuates the idea that they are happy and healthy children and therefore furthers the question as to say: "Why would these women lose custody of their children if their children are this happy and healthy?" Instead of showing desperate women, the front page insists on the bright and happy dimension of the family bonds represented in the photograph. Besides, the fact that the front page juxtaposes the photograph of children with a title on abortion at the bottom of the picture, shows an audacious way of representing the multifarious dimension of women's issues, addressing mothers as well as women who do not wish to become mothers. The bottom title on abortion is "Backstreet abortions: "Some of us had 3 or 4," which creates a link with the three children represented in the photograph, as to convey the idea that all issues about women are taken into account as part of a series of issues in which all women are united and not separate. This seeks to convey the idea of a bond between all women, a community in

which women help one another and take one another's issues into account. This eye-catching front page is very effective in the way it calls for the reader's implication, and the play on contrast also contributes to the eye-catching effect of this front page and illustrates *Spare Rib*'s unconventional stance on women's issues.

2) **“Disturbing images”: artistic and aesthetic ideas**

Not only did *Spare Rib* deal with social issues, it also favoured the development of artistic ideas by showing front pages which carried a clear artistic stance.

The *Spare Rib* front page of the June 1977 issue is illustrative of the artistic drive of the magazine, by showing a black and white photograph of a naked woman, covered in black and white paint coordinated as to resemble a zebra's coat. The background colour is white, the picture of the woman is cut at half length of the page, and the main title underneath says: “Disturbing images of women” in black capital letters, with the second title “International Art Exhibition, Berlin” in bold red capital letters. The fact that the woman is naked is indicative of the magazine's radical stance, as her breasts are uncovered. She is facing the camera but leaning forward and looking sideways. Her hair is tied in a neglected bun on top of her head, which contributes to the aestheticism of the picture. She does not look bothered by the photographer but rather confident and self-assured, which conveys a disturbing effect, as women are usually expected to be embarrassed when confronted to a camera, especially when they are naked. The fact that the woman is painted as to resemble an animal highlights the comparison between the way women are considered in society and the way animals are treated. In this sense, this could be a way of showing that women's oppression tends to reduce them to an animal state, where their bodies are looked at, treated like and objectified like the bodies of animals in zoos. Moreover, the choice of the colour red for the title of the magazine and for the bottom titles contrasts with the black and white photograph, but provides a coherent aspect to the front page and reinforces its unusual aspect. Indeed, titles do not usually appear in red, as it is the colour of passion and of anger, yet here, the editors appropriate this colour in an eye-catching manner. The main title in black refers to the international art exhibition in Berlin, which is indicative of the magazine's openness to what goes on in other countries, especially in the artistic field. It focuses on women's art and explores the use of the female body as a means of artistic expression, which contributes to the women's liberation movement. It is thus indicated in the second page of the magazine: “Two

exhibitions reviewed (p 35 and p 42) in this issue show the problems feminist artists face when they use women's bodies in their work or show sexist imagery to analyse sexism." Moreover, in the article dedicated to this exhibition, we can read "The international show in Berlin was particularly eye-opening – but stormy, raising crucial questions about all-women shows" and also "We need them because prejudiced exhibition selection procedures have been one reason why we've seen so little women's art." This issue's focus on women's art emphasizes the multi-faceted dimension of the women's liberation movement by questioning women's place in arts, and the front page contributes to shedding light on the female body in its "disturbing" aspect.

The front page of the March 1978 issue of *Spare Rib* is an example of the editors' desire to explore the artistic eye, in this case, the eye of a female photographer. The background colour of the page is black, which is unusual as the *Spare Rib* front pages usually resort to a choice of bright and vivid colours. Here, apart from black and white, the only colour in the front page is the colour of the title of the magazine and of the main titles at the bottom of the page, which are in apple green. Beneath the title is a close-up shot of a woman; she is looking straight at the camera, she looks tired with bags under her eyes. What is around and behind her is blurred as the focus is set on her face. She is not smiling and she seems to be around fifty or sixty years old. The photograph does not occupy the full space of the page. It is cut at the half length of the page, and underneath the picture is the handwritten phrase "This is now one of my favourite pictures," which gives the picture a lively aspect, by suggesting the idea that the photograph is not static but implies that the subject in the picture has a voice. The corresponding title underneath the picture is "A photographer looks at herself," which reinforces the unusual aspect of the front page, as those who take photos for magazines are rarely the subjects of the same magazines. Here, this *Spare Rib* front page has a double purpose: by the unusualness of the female gaze which is represented as staring at the reader, this front page creates a reversal of codes. Usually, women in magazines are presented as objects for the male gaze. Here, this idea is overturned by showing the reader – male or female – that he/she has become the object of the woman's gaze in the picture. The other purpose of this front page is to enable the photographer to engage in an introspective move, which contributes to the artistic stance of the magazine. The idea that it takes into account the perspective of a photographer by letting her look at herself is an interesting way of exploring the female gaze. Besides, social issues are not left aside in the front page, as among the bottom titles we can read "Houston, Texas – the women's moderation movement?" or "Fleet Street straightens out lesbian mothers".

3) **A radical stance and innovative techniques**

A number of *Spare Rib* front pages have highlighted the radical stance of the magazine and its tendency to promote a broad sense of the idea of feminism, in its capacity to defend all women, from all backgrounds and also women from minorities. The magazine also showed daring and audacious covers in order to challenge preconceived ideas and stereotypes on femininity but also on masculinity. Such is the case with the front page of the November 1973 *Spare Rib* issue, which deals with the question of day nursery centres. The cover shows the photograph of a man – white, aged between forty and fifty years old – holding a little girl – black, aged between three and six years old –. The corresponding title of the picture is “Day Nursery Revolution” written in a handwritten style, in a soft colour between orange and pink. This title enables us to assume that this man is the little girl’s tutor in a day nursery centre. Both the man and the little girl look like they have a close relationship; the man is carrying the little girl in the air, and both characters are looking at each other, with their faces close to each other. They are both smiling and looking happy, suggesting that they have a close relationship. The fact that the little girl has brown skin and that the man is white sheds light on interracial relationships and on the idea that day nursery centres aim at taking care of children from all backgrounds with no discrimination, which is an innovative step against discrimination based on skin colour. Therefore, the editorial choice of this front page has a double purpose: it promotes the idea of a multicultural society in which people help one another out irrespective of their skin colours on the one hand, and it sheds light on the fact that all children are concerned by day nursery centres and that these centres do not carry out discriminating policies on the other hand.

The April 1975 issue of *Spare Rib* also chose to illustrate one of the main fights of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1970s and of feminism at large, which is male violence against women. Its front page stages the picture of a woman sitting on a couch with a baby next to her. The baby seems to be interested in what the woman is doing with her hands, as she seems to be playing with an object – probably her keys –. The woman looks absent-minded, as if she were thinking of something. This statement is easily justified by the title of this issue’s main article, which is “it’s no good sitting here waiting... - battered women rebuild their lives.” Indeed, battered women who consider leaving their husband sits as one of

the many battles supported by feminists during the sixties and the seventies. Moreover, the editorial choice of staging a black woman is also evocative of the magazine's desire to appeal to all women and to represent the issue of battered women as a broad issue which affects any women from any social background and any skin colour. The fact that the woman is staged as being absent-minded and thus not focused on her baby is representative of how being battered prevents women from exercising their role of mothers in the right way, which produces a distance between them and their child. Moreover, battered women are also subjected to depression and mental health issues, which the saddened look of the woman seems to indicate. Moreover, the fact that only the woman and her child are represented in order to tackle the issue of battered woman seeks to raise awareness on the solitude and the isolation which these women undergo. The focus is not set on men but on the consequences of their acts of violence which bear repercussions not only on the lives of women but also on the lives of the children raised by violent fathers and battered mothers. The photograph conveys both an atmosphere of calmness and of intimacy between the woman and the baby, but it also emphasizes the solitude and the desperate dimension of the lives of battered women and their children. All titles of this cover are in green, except the title "Abortion Act Threatened" which is in white, as to put it in contrast with the photograph of the baby. Here again, this technique corroborates the idea that even though a mother and her child are represented on the front page, the magazine also addresses and sheds light on the issue of abortion, and therefore simultaneously takes into account the fight of women who do not wish to become mothers. This juxtaposition of the question of abortion and the baby in the background emphasises the idea that it is normal and alright to discuss abortion rights and the right to have a baby at the same time. It therefore sheds light on the multifaceted aspect of women's rights and shows that women are not opposed nor separate but united in the fight for emancipation.

Similarly, and furthering the idea that *Spare Rib* promoted a broad definition of feminism, not a feminism which concerned only middle-class white women but women from all social classes and all skin colours, the front page of the *Spare Rib* issue from October 1979 is dedicated to the fight of black women. It displays four photographs of women, juxtaposed on the right side of the page upon a greenish yellow background. All titles of this cover are in black, except for the title of the magazine's main article, which is "Black Women Together" written in white capital letters on a dark rectangle, at the bottom left of the page, beneath and next to the two bottom pictures of the page. The four pictures are juxtaposed in a way which seeks to create a linearity. The reader's eyes are to follow this linearity by starting with the top right picture, by moving then to the picture on the left of the top picture, and then focusing

on the last two pictures, the bottom right one which is positioned underneath the top right picture and eventually the bottom left picture, with the title of this main topic next to it on the bottom right. The first picture, the top right one, shows several women. Their ethnicity is not provided but we can assume from their light skin tone and their straight hair tied in tight haircuts that they might be from East Asia. The woman at the front looks worried and upset, she holds her hand to her chest in a sign of protest or indignation. The photograph shows that she is taking part in a discussion and her preoccupied attitude reinforces the idea of a struggle from women of colour. The second picture, the one on the left of the top right picture shows a woman putting her thumbs up and looking down. The picture is taken from below, which gives the woman an aspect of her as a superior being. Moreover, her face is also lit from below, which accounts for the representation of her as an enlightened being, almost like a goddess, with her statuesque posture and her stoic gaze, which is indicative of neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction. She looks confident, serene, and strong, and the idea of her as a superior being is reinforced by the perspective of the picture. On the bottom left of this picture is the photograph of two women having a discussion, one of them is black, the other is white, they look like they are having a friendly conversation, as if to show that they are not arguing but rather agreeing with each other. Besides, only the profile of the white woman is visible, whereas the black woman is almost facing the camera, which makes her whole face visible. This actually sets the focus on the black woman, rather than on the white woman, whose body is also cut from the picture. Only her hand is visible, with her figure pointing in the air as she seems to be having a precise idea. The black woman seems perplex but attentive, which illustrates the idea that black women are open for debate with white women, but that they are also waiting to be heard and to be given the possibility to speak. Eventually, the bottom left picture shows a group of four women who seem to be demonstrating, the photograph is taken as they are singing or screaming a slogan, and they all look energetic. Two of them are wearing turbans on their heads as to hide their hair, and the other two are wearing short afros, as a sign of pride of their origins, of their culture, and of their physical appearance. They look happy and they do not seem to be bothered or interrupted by the photographer. All four photographs create a whole, a unity between these different situations, which seeks to convey the impression that black women are united in the same fights for equality and that the fight against discrimination is linked with feminism and the women's movement for emancipation in the 1970s.

The mixing of artistic and aesthetic tendencies with down to earth topics and serious social issues highlights *Spare Rib*'s great contribution to the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s, as well as its kaleidoscopic dimension. With its audacious front pages, *Spare Rib* was established as a unique way of showing and exploring women's issues by shedding light on numerous questions highly dealt with in feminism such as equal pay, the rights for abortion, or male violence against women. The magazine's radical stance on women's emancipation viewed feminism on a broad spectrum, taking into account issues like women's strike and homosexuality, but also the place of women in arts and the black women's fight. The magazine's often radical stance offered an unconventional way of exploring women's issues, and this stance was clearly emphasized by the displaying of eye-catching and audacious front pages.

Sources :

1) Eye-catching techniques and a play on contrasts

Spare Rib issue 4, October 1972

Spare Rib issue 31, January 1975

Spare Rib issue 50, September 1976

2) “Disturbing images”: An artistic and aesthetic stance

Spare Rib issue 59, June 1977

Spare Rib issue 68, March 78

3) A radical stance and innovative topics

Spare Rib issue 17, November 73

Spare Rib issue 34, April 1975

Spare Rib issue 87, October 1979