East End Irony Error

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Dougie Wallace, *East Ended*, Dewi Lewis Publishing, Stockport 2020, £35.00, hardback, 144 pages, 95 colour plates. ISBN: 978-1-911306-60-3.

Henri Cartier-Bresson used to remark that he enjoyed taking photographs in England because it was like going to the theatre: everyone dressed for the part. His well-known photographs of the Coronation of George VI in 1937 speak to that interest, particularly of the crowd in Trafalgar Square, some of whom had been waiting all night for the

procession, viewing it from the monument they had climbed, while below a man in a three-piece suit remains comfortably slumbering on a bed of newspapers. If that England was theatre, Dougie Wallace's may first appear as pantomime or cartoon. In a series of books and exhibitions, Wallace has depicted the drinkers and clubbers of Shoreditch, hen and stag parties in Blackpool, the various gradations among the super-rich as they circle Harrods in a grotesque competition for social distinction, and most recently the mix of social elements in London's East End.[1] Of the Harrods' denizens, in particular, Wallace was openly critical, both in photographs and prose, writing in 2015 that the scene is a story of 'glut, greed and the wealth gap playing out on the streets of a city which has seen a 400 per cent rise in demand for food banks in the last year.'[2] His Twitter feed contains similar comments about inequality and the low-wage economy.

But then, photographically speaking, he is not particularly kind to anyone. A working-class photographer, originally from Glasgow, who served in the British Army, Wallace stalks the streets, seeking out and creating photographic confrontations. Using a digital SLR with a wide-angle zoom, and two or three flash guns attached, he works close to his subjects and does not mind if they react to his presence—which they do, frequently. In this, he a little like William Klein who pushed his wide-angle lens into the faces of annoyed New Yorkers in the 1950s, causing ripples of discomfort which could be read as registering of city's pall of alienation.[3] The effect in Wallace is to produce a dizzying, gaily coloured array of expression, stance, gesture and fragmented detail. In his essay for *East Ended*, Paul Lowe describes the images as 'kaleidoscopic', which nicely captures their jangling array of bright colours and strange spatial arrangements.[4] The effect of the more extreme wide-angle photographs to exaggerate the distance between near and far is countered by the flattening effects of flash to produce a sharply delineated but contradictory space in which the specimens are frozen. The use of several flash guns turns the camera into a mini studio, says Wallace, and indeed the fashion studio's

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[1] Dougie Wallace, *Shoreditch Wild Life*, Hoxton Mini Press, London 2014; *Stags, Hens & Bunnies: A Blackpool Story*, Dewi Lewis Publishing, Stockport 2014; *Harrodsburg*, Dewi Lewis Publishing, Stockport 2017; *East Ended*, Dewi Lewis Publishing, Stockport 2020. Many of Wallace's photographs can be found online in high resolution; since colour is crucial to their effect, the images reproduced here should be used to identify the colour versions online.

[2] David James, 'Dougie Wallace Shoots the Lives of the Mega Rich in Harrodsburg', *British Journal of Photography*, 28 March 2018.

[3] William Klein, *Life is Good & Good For You in New York: Trance Witness Revels*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1956.

[4] Paul Lowe, 'The Age of Shoreditchification', in Wallace, *East Ended*, n.p.

merciless illumination is turned on subjects who are mostly unprepared for it.[5] The results are startlingly unfamiliar as flashlight, skilfully balanced with available light, illumines the effects of age and rough living, of intense partying and cosmetic surgery, along with the fine detail of dress and accessories.

East Ended stands out from Wallace's other work which explored discrete social strata, for here on the streets of Shoreditch different ages, classes, races and religions are brought into collision. The area is notorious for its rapid and thoroughgoing gentrification in which street art has played a prominent role, as it was recast in the public imagination from criminal spoliation to decorative asset. Wallace has lived there for two decades, seeing and recording sweeping changes. The book's resulting parade of vanities and frailties is not a pretty one. Indeed, some of the older residents seem dazed by the intense chaos of colour and squalor that has engulfed their

[5] Video interview, 'Harrodsburg: Up Close with the Super Rich', *Lensculture*, n.d. https://www.lensculture.com/articles/dougie-wallace-harrodsburg-up-close-with-the-super-rich

neighbourhood, particularly in the backdrop to almost every image—the concatenation of graffiti, elaborate works of street art, adverts, the common marriage of adverts and street art (for, say, Gucci or Converse), and logos and slogans everywhere—on every wall, on signs, on clothes and on bodies. Wallace acutely brings this writing into his images, using it to comment on the surrounding social scene, and on some of its underlying causes, particularly property speculation and social exclusion. For instance, in an image of a worker lighting a cigarette in a doorway, his lowered head echoes a piece of street art at his side, while a simple graphic on the wall below shows a seesaw, tipped towards 'Land Value'. And on the other side? 'Everything Else'. In another, of a much-decorated group of youths chatting, laughing and wielding a film camera (a real sign of social distinction, that) a background graphic reads 'Irony/ Error', as though a computer had just crashed.

Wallace's work as a whole documents class stratification, through displays of deportment and bearing, of aspiration, carnival misbehaviour and abjection (Wallace's

sleepers are generally blotto). Class is consciously acted out in a reciprocal routine in which each segment keeps a wary eye on the other, and in which, as EP Thompson put it of a very different time, despite the vast gulf between gentry and plebs, 'rulers and crowd needed each other, watched each other, performed theatre and countertheatre to each other's auditorium, moderated each other's political behaviour.'[6]

Wallace's highly charged form of social description often has critics reaching for a comparison with Hogarth's satirical prints. Both have a similar interest in the detail of social display, and in the contrast of classes and customs on London streets. But given Wallace's heightened colour, the flat illumination of the flash-lit figures that seem cut out from their backgrounds, and the ubiquity of writing, the effect is nearer to the early cartoons of Cruikshank or Rowlandson. Like them, Wallace is on the hunt for some telling distortion of expression, stance or action that can point up one of the myriad forms of depravity. While Hogarth's viewers are certainly meant to enjoy the detail of

[6] E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*, The New Press, New York 1991, pp. 56-7.

the corruption that he so lovingly delineates, at least some of the characters depicted behave well, and are the victims of others' greed and cruelty: an implicit morality is the penumbral negative that underlies the fate of the immoral.[7] In Cruikshank and Rowlandson, no one escapes the cruel pen, and there are definite affinities between Cruikshank's annual *Monstrosities*, his parodies on the fashions of the day, and some of Wallace's more absurd poseurs who in their hair, dress and bodily décor reflect the street art around them.[8] While Wallace's work may initially seem to wallow in the extreme displays of vain and deluded egos, does it also contain a shadowy ideal?

One way to think about this question is to look at the parallels between Wallace and Martin Parr. Both made their names in the magazine and gallery worlds alike with jaundiced portrayals of the working class in seaside resorts.[9] Both use garish colour, flash and often work very close up. Both cultivate social cliché, hunting for subjects who conform to tabloid stereotype. In both, too, the search for cliché is in mild tension with the exhibition of assorted eccentrics (though those, too, conform to another stereotype about the British), and the urge to precise social description.

While Parr has since mellowed and has attained the dubious distinction of national treasure, as his entertaining and popular National Portrait Gallery exhibition amply proved, his early work was highly controversial.[10] His election to the Magnum agency was the cause of an infamous dispute over the very purpose of documentary photography: should it, as Cartier-Bresson and Philip Jones Griffiths held, be indissociably bound to humanism, and did Parr's images of an apparently

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[7] There is some debate about the balance between the entertaining display of immorality and putative morals in Hogarth. For a view of Hogarth as exhibits 'moralistic fervour', see David H. Solkin's remarkable account in *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century England*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1993, ch. 3. For essays that play up the spectacle of immorality, see the essays by Mark Hallett and Frédéric Ogée in Bernadette Fort/ Angela Rosenthal, eds., *The Other Hogarth: Aesthetics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001.

[8] If you look hard enough, any critique, no matter how harsh, can be found to contain an ideal, as in Thackeray's defence of Cruikshank's ridicule of the Prince Regent on the grounds that it was to assist 'the most spotless, pure-mannered darling of a Princess that ever married a heartless debauchee of a Prince Royal.' 'An Essay on the Genius of George Cruikshank' (1840), in William Makepeace Thackeray, *Critical Papers in Art*, Macmillan and Co., London 1904, p. 39.

[9] In Parr's case with *The Last Resort: Photographs of New Brighton*, Promenade Press, Wallasey 1986.

[10] Phillip Prodger, *Only Human: Photographs by Martin Parr*, National Portrait Gallery/ Phaidon Press, London 2019.

irresponsible, hopeless and slovenly working class violate that bond?[11] Like Parr, too, Wallace went on to focus on the more privileged, and in *Harrodsburg* subjected them to unflattering and intrusive close-ups in the quest for a photographic critique. His Middle Eastern super-rich subjects hate the results, and in Doha apparently there are calls for this 'disgusting' and 'perverted' photographer to be brought before the law.[12] His privileged white subjects, it should be said, are treated with equal contempt.

Wallace may be seen, then, as an amped-up Parr, who, uses flash in a more mannered fashion, is more confrontational in his dealings with his subjects, and captures more extreme forms of behaviour. It is hard to read much sympathy into his depictions of the drunken stags and hens as they stagger about Blackpool's run-down party spots, expose themselves, throw up and urinate in public, or pass out in the gutter.

Nonetheless, two major factors divide the early, needling Parr from Wallace: the first is the domination of social media and the smart phone, which has brought about a profound change in many people's everyday relations with photography. If the reaction of Klein's New Yorkers was to shy away, glare in suspicion or raise a hand to obscure their face, Wallace's subjects are as likely to preen, pose or shoot a selfie. The leisured layers that wander Shoreditch streets insistently make and share images, and Wallace contributes his own distinct stylistic strand to the social media streams.[13]

The second is that, dire though the social divides of 1980s Britain became, they are a great deal worse now. The (erroneous) ironic and dandyish plays with Victorian and Edwardian fashions and facial hair, which Wallace assiduously documents, evoke the solidity and grandeur of the imperial age, but can also be seen as acidic asides on the levels of inequality found in the Belle Époque, revivified in the present.[14] The interest of Shoredtich is that there the usual social apartheid does not hold, and kitchen workers, market traders, tourists, the indigent, the old posh and the young trust-fund holders, dandies, bohemians and garbage collectors stand cheek by jowl.

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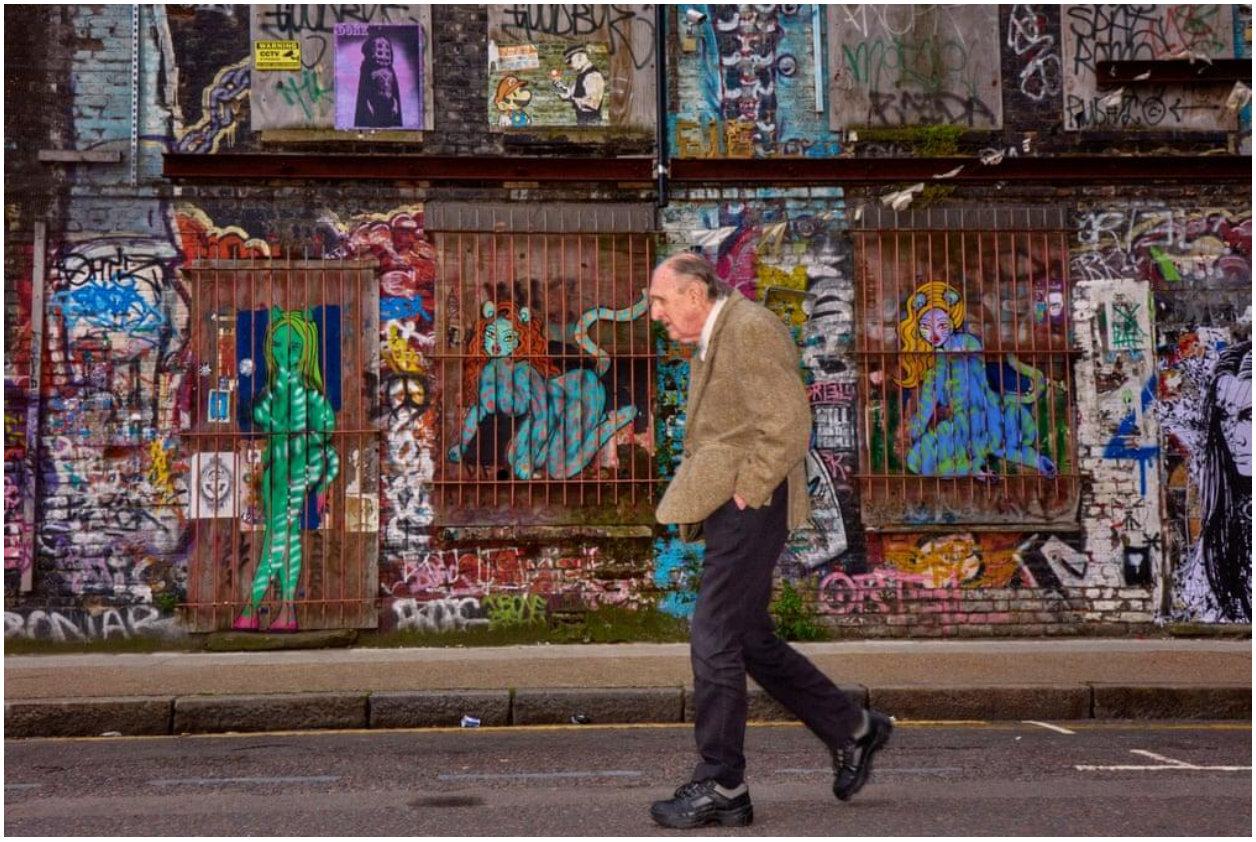
[11] For an account, see Russell Miller, *Magnum: Fifty Years at the Front Line of History*, Secker & Warburg, London 1997, pp. 294-8.
[12] James, 'Dougie Wallace Shoots the Lives of the Mega Rich'.
[13] Wallace shows his work on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook.
[14] In his famous book, Thomas Piketty shows that contemporary levels of inequality approach those of the Belle Époque. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2014.

Wallace's photographs point up the contrasts, and the way that discrete worlds—of religion, race, class and age—coexist in the same frame, and in his account generally fail to communicate. Indeed, they often seem to studiously ignore each other, as in the various images of women wearing the hijab or burqa passing by extravagantly dressed youth or needy displays of street art. In one of the first images in the book, taken at extreme wide-angle, an elderly Bangladeshi man, flash-lit, looms in the foreground, his gaze questioning, his mouth open, perhaps to begin a protest at being photographed. To his right, very close, sits a smiling, shirtless youth, also illuminated by flash. The background shows a crowd of cool young people socialising in the sunshine before a wall elaborately decorated with street art. The central figure may be confused or thrown off balance by the presence of Wallace's camera, but the effect—magnified by the flash that cuts him out of the sun and shadow of the scene behind—is to suggest the claustrophobic juxtaposition of contrary worlds.



This effect also works in the contrast between figure and environment alone. Another image shows a man stooped by age, wearing a tweed jacket and trainers, striding by a wall entirely covered with tags and paintings, posters and stencil work, along with a warning that the area is under surveillance. Amid the chaotic palimpsest of images and writing, the cavorting of a sequence of naked animal-women hybrids stand out. The well-known street artist Pure Evil has written about how those who paint public walls are 'yelling at you through the piece, shouting!'[15] The severe competition for attention and wall space produces a visual cacophony, and Wallace ably suggests that the elderly bow their heads, lower their eyes and hasten past.

Wallace also positions his subjects against the saturated advertising environment. In one photograph that again sets up young against old, a young couple, black-clad and tattooed, confidently occupy their space, the woman striking up a variant of the much-mocked Tory power pose adopted by Osborne and Javid; divided from them by a heap of cardboard boxes, stand three ragged elderly people. Two pass by while another—seemingly—examines the boxes for anything of value. Once again, the flash lifts the

[15] Quoted in Joe Epstein, *London Graffiti and Street Art*, Ebury Press, London 2014, n.p.

foreground figure from the scene, and again she stares at the lens in apparent apprehension and confusion. Behind, in mockery of both sets of figures, are Burberry adverts, flaunting their studio-lit ideally perfect youth (and in an echo of Wallace's flash, they show part of the lighting rig).

There is a resonance here with many photographs that have juxtaposed a propaganda ideal to a dreary reality. Margaret Bourke-White, photographing a flood disaster for *Life* in 1937, depicted a line of African Americans queuing for relief below a poster showing a beaming white family in a car, boasting the 'World's Highest Standard of Living'. Or we may think of Cartier-Bresson's gently melancholic photographs of dowdy Soviet citizens going about their lives against the backdrop of statues and posters depicting the heroes of the revolution.[16] Street art sets up its own heroes who include a few identifiable celebrities but are more often beautiful, harmonious, multicultural youths

[16] Henri Cartier-Bresson, *À Propos de l'URSS*, Éditions de Chêne, Paris 1973.

which also (perhaps inadvertently) mock the scene below.[17] Soviet propaganda, it has to be said, had nothing on Shoreditch's sheer intensity and ubiquity of advertisement and self-advertisement, in which the old is daily laid over the new, and official adverts, fly posters, street artists and graffiti writers engage in a continual battle to dominate the visual landscape.

Among the advertisers are London's museums, particularly Tate. Posters for its recent exhibition of Don McCullin stand in the background to one of Wallace's photographs, invoking monochromatic, emotionally charged humanism, and more specifically McCullin's work in the East End in the 1960s and 1970s, in which the homeless gathered about open fires in desolate and deeply impoverished streets.[18] In another image, unusually simple, Wallace records the alteration of a Tate poster from reading 'Join Tate Collective' to 'Join Tate's Collective for Conservative Propaganda'. Since it is straight document of the alteration, it seems that he approves of the message. In the closing

[17] Street art has its own regular villains as well; in the East End, they are logically Trump, Farage and Johnson.

[18] The exhibition, which showed these photographs, was at Tate Britain in 2019, and (coronavirus permitting) will be shown at Tate Liverpool until September 2020.

statement of the book, Wallace writes of the way in which street art and advertising have come into an alliance to produce 'Instagrammable propaganda' but holds up as an alternative 'cheeky protest posters' that deface the adverts and offer political critique.

What was, then, in the humanist documentary of everyday life, an observant recording of the struggles of work and family life, and the ordinary compensations of sociability, solidarity, humour and moments of joy, becomes here a fervid, garish and grotesque cartoon. Cartier-Bresson famously established the model of non-interference, in which the image—a variant of the Surrealist found object—would be quietly taken from the ongoing scene. To use flash, he wrote, would be like bringing a pistol to a concert.[19] Wallace with his camera and flash-guns both documents and alters the social scene. Many of his subjects, of course, are doing the same, but while they generally confect conformist scenes of social distinction, he sets out to produce the appearance of social antagonism. In this, he may be compared to those artists who aggravate social wounds, making them more visible and painful, either photographically (Boris Mikhailov) or in other ways, particularly involving performance (Santiago Sierra and Tania Bruguera).[20]

Any violence, though, remains implicit. Wallace is keen to identify with the notorious New York photographer Weegee who, tuned to the police radio, chased down crime scenes, usually at night. There are some similarities: the use of flash, the way the photographer's presence alters people's behaviour, and the great skill both show in organising complex figure compositions from chaotic scenes. Yet Weegee's photographs, in which the subjects are often harshly plucked out by his flash from the darkness, are decked out with corpses, wounds and pools of blood, and record overt aggression, oppression and trauma. The images in *East Ended* balance flash against daylight (and often bright sunlight), and the photographic sophistication of many of the people on display produces a gaudy spectacle which carries with it an undertow of melancholy.

Photographic humanism has been undergoing a marked revival in photojournalism, particularly when funded by NGOs, being committed to a vision of unity and harmony, while constantly recording events which flagrantly defile it. In *Harrodsburg*, Wallace

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[19] Sophie Howarth/ Stephen McLaren, *Street Photography Now*, Thames & Hudson, London 2010, p. 12.
[20] In a well-known series of interventions, Claire Bishop has used Laclau and Mouffe's model of political antagonism to interpret these works of art. For her book-length account, see *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London 2012.

usefully identifies and (as in a cartoon) personifies one political enemy. In *East Ended*, he explores a few of the myriad consequences of their untrammelled dominance. Yet a deep uncertainty hangs over these images, which give the impression of action and interaction, though on closer inspection it is hard to tell what is really going on. It is certainly tempting to think that a man in stained work clothes, seen from behind, is looking up at an advertisement for luxury apartments but the viewer cannot know this. Wallace's ambition is to sweat the scene, bringing to the surface the deep tensions and enmities that surely underlie it. That project may have a political use that goes beyond entertaining spectacle, and for anyone who has wandered those streets—perhaps with a camera—it reminds them that they cannot escape implication in that cloying web of cartoonish self-display, inequality, cliché and hostility.

The affinity with street art is perhaps deeper than Wallace recognises. We have seen that it has its heroes and its villains, but far more common than either is its great procession of monsters, vermin and hybrids: Frankenstein's creation, zombies, robots,

werewolves, rats, animated skulls and skeletons. Despite its current commercialism, street art has its roots in an illegal assertion of right to the city—who can paint what, where and when?—so these figures often stand in for the underclass (and indeed the artists themselves). They exhibit their exclusion and rejection from polite society: you think we are monsters? Here you are, then, look. Wallace's figures, who in various photographs mirror the paintings around them, in gestures, pose and dress, are similar cartoon monsters performing their own decadence and degradation, not always ironically. If, like all subcultures, this one has been assimilated, and its few stars loaded with fame and riches, it nevertheless drags behind it the spectacle of class antagonism. The neoliberal revival of capitalism red in tooth and claw, and with it of the hyper-conformist and thus absurdist behaviour of many of its social-media dominated denizens, casts an uncanny air over the urban scene, which Wallace dramatises. It is no accident that the book's last picture shows sunlit spectators before letters crudely painted on a railway viaduct: they read 'East Endead'.