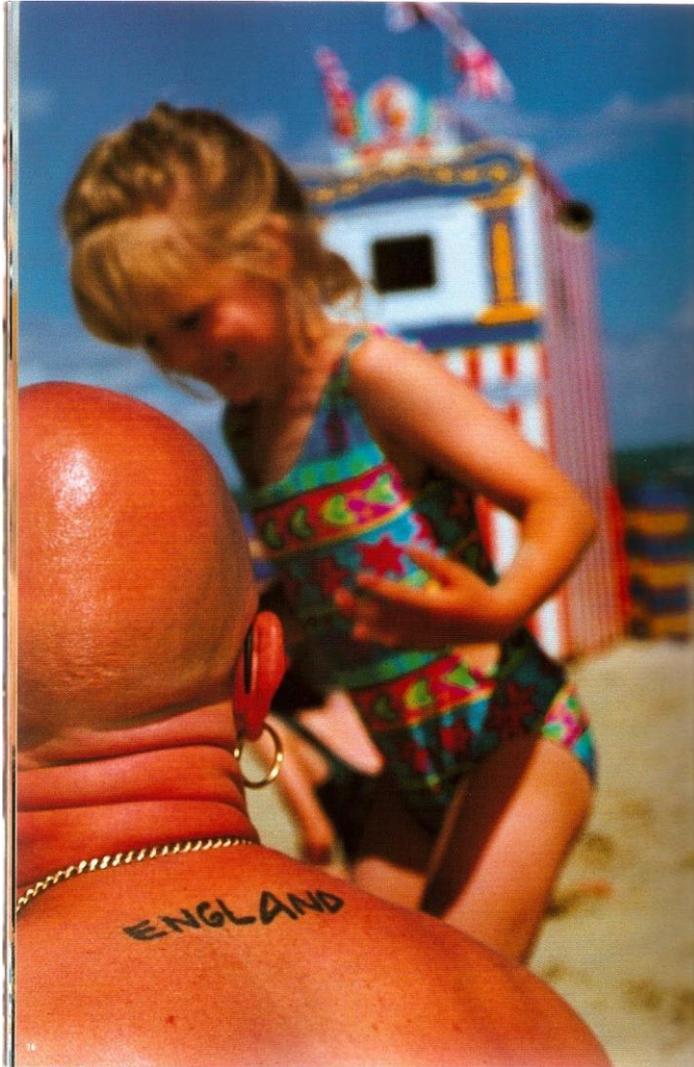


A Stage for the English

Julian Stallabrass

'Thinking of England' [review of Martin Parr at the Barbican Art Gallery], *New Statesman*, 18 February 2002, pp. 38-9.



Henri Cartier-Bresson has remarked that he liked taking photographs in England because its people played out their social roles with emphasis, as if they were actors on stage. There are many characteristics of Martin Parr's photography that separate it from Cartier-Bresson's, vulgar saturated colour versus refined monochrome, the snatching of a typical (even dull) moment from time versus the revelatory decisive moment, and above all of attitude towards their human subjects, yet the English still perform stalwartly before the lens, rarely departing from type.

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Parr's work has appeared to keep pace with the large social changes that have transformed the country since the early 1980s. At the time of Thatcher's uneven, regional recession, he was photographing the impoverished and demoralised working class, behaving badly or carelessly at a northern seaside resort. While the documentary convention was to make grainy, black-and-white photographs of begrimed but dignified workers against factories or in dilapidated homes, Parr viewed them coldly at high resolution, not labouring but at leisure, and in an environment they appeared to have despoiled themselves. As the middle class grew and blurred, Parr took his tart, anthropological lens to its activities in superstores and social functions, to the decoration of its living rooms and behaviour in cars. The subdued colours traditionally associated with rural England were buried in a gaudy procession of show homes, interior furnishings, and the display of all manner of commodities, just as the land was. As the political establishment decided it would be a good idea to forget about social stratification, he produced the book *Think of England*, in which the classes merge in displays of colourful vulgarity and social stereotyping. Yet all this work has been united by a fascination with prejudicial cliché: it imparts a vision of a mostly white (or on the beach pink) middle England in which objects and people conspire to confirm received ideas—where breakfasts are always greasy, the upper class (or those who dress as such) haughtily quaff champagne and chase foxes, while the lower orders flaunt their invariably broiled and hairy backs, heavy gold jewellery and cemented make-up.



In the Barbican exhibition, various spaces are mocked up as living rooms, not of the sort in which you find prints by Martin Parr (though they hang there) but of the sort that he would photograph. Perhaps, this device suggests, the cliché of the pictures has become

so insistent and absurd that it undermines itself. Perhaps the forms of class differentiation have become mere ghosts of their former selves, with the falling away of specifically bourgeois mores and values under the assault of the uncaged market. There is also the feeling that as England redefines itself against European integration and constitutionally sanctioned Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalisms, it coalesces haplessly around the most clichéd and degraded symbols of its identity, as flimsy and illusory as those artificial rooms.

That people and objects in these photographs seem to exist on equal terms in a parade of over-familiar appearances, has led some to condemn Parr's view of his subjects. When interviewed, Parr claims that his acidity is tempered with affection. There are characteristics of photographs that imply a relation between the photographer and the photographed: do they seem aware of the camera, and if so how do they react, how close is the photographer to the subject, and what lens has been used? In much of Parr's recent work, people seem completely unaware of being photographed, being picked out from a distance by a long lens. The fragments that Parr frames are smaller, no longer assemblages of people but portions of them (mouths, breasts, bellies, necks), and their leavings, a register of how consumers are divided into sub-personal drives by marketers, each of which can be appealed to in a different way. They seem to subsist without reflection or remembrance in the narrow time of the consumer.

The difficulty of knowing whether Parr's photographs confirm or undermine stereotypes is part of a wider difficulty with the reading of photographs, especially when unsupported by text or context. Social stereotype in Parr is often matched with photographic cliché, such as the extreme close-up, flash-lit figures in sunshine standing out with unreal clarity from the background as if in a fashion shoot, the garish colour of the advert, the quasi-surreal focus on the lively commodity and the dead soul. The two work together to create a recognisable nexus of images that are extremely good at generating journalistic discourse (including such speculations as those above), which can be plausibly projected on the null ground of the work. In the 1940s communications theorist Claude Shannon argued that any thoroughly predictable message must be devoid of information. Parr provides an image of the world that is only novel because it appears to more than conform to conservative imaginings of how bad things have become. Yet there are multitudes of actions, major and minor, that Parr's lens cannot encompass, whether it be some gesture of working-class solidarity at the seaside or the wrecking of a McDonalds. Parr's photographs, and their success in galleries and newspapers, do finally convey information, but less about their ostensible subjects than their implied viewers.

Martin Parr: Photographic Works is at the Barbican Art Gallery, London until 14 April.