



Title

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Cheap shots: Martin Parr and virality

by Lisa Stein • 13.02.2020

The day after Britain left the European Union on 31st January 2020 a number of images and videos captioned with the hashtag ‘thick’ began to circulate on Twitter. Posted by disgruntled Remainers, they showed BBC interviews with white working-class men and women across the country celebrating the UK’s departure. Several tweets highlighted a spelling mistake on a Brexiteer’s t-shirt: ‘Does anyone know what a referendudum is? #thick’. Others mocked Leavers interviewed at Parliament Square who made claims based on factual errors or a lack of awareness: ‘The brains behind Brexit...4 years on and #thick cretins still think the European court of human rights is part of The EU’.

Twitter users from both camps were quick to respond to these viral posts, pointing out the bias inherent in sharing this footage and in the news coverage it was sourced from: ‘I’m annoyed at Brexit. I’m even more annoyed at this #thick sentiment aimed at those who were ill-informed, who tend to be “working-class”. Don’t blame them. Blame the people at the top who prey, the dismissal of proper education on the matter, and the spread of fake news’. Another user accused the BBC, which has seen a rise in complaints about its coverage of Brexit since the referendum in 2016,¹ of media bias: ‘Typical @BBCPolitics attempt to humiliate Brexit voters as inarticulate, uneducated and “white”... At Parliament Square there were all classes, races and ages - where was the @BBCPolitics? #boycottbbc #bbc-classism #BBCracists’.



Fig. 1 Tower Colliery, Glamorgan, Wales, by Martin Parr. 1993. (Courtesy the artist, Magnum Photos and Rocket Gallery).

The tweets trending in the wake of Brexit demonstrate how new media is transforming traditional news organisations like the BBC, which ‘now operate in an increasingly convoluted and contested environment’,² where what matters more than factual and nuanced reporting is virality. What the British tabloid press realised long before Trump’s tweets littered our timelines is that politically charged and adversarial content is the key to appealing to a mass audience because it evokes strong emotions such as amusement or anger and is more likely to be shared.³ These posts also highlight how photography, which has played an integral role in perpetuating ideas about class since the mid-nineteenth century, functions within this new media landscape, how instrumental it is to shaping our understanding of current political events and communicating ideas about ourselves and our identity.



Fig. 2 Abergavenny, Wales, by Martin Parr. 2008. (Courtesy the artist, Magnum Photos and Rocket Gallery).

Like many of the images and videos shared on Twitter on the morning after Brexit, Martin Parr's photographs of the British working class leave a bad taste in the mouth. And yet his highly saturated, often unflattering portraits of his subjects **FIG.1**, the clothes they wear and the food they eat **FIG.2**, have been exhibited more or less annually – on more than five occasions in 2019 alone – since Parr began taking photographs in the mid-1970s. From museum and gallery openings to photography festivals, his unforgiving images of people engaging in leisure activities such as spending a day on the beach or attending a football match **FIG.3** seem to be everywhere. In addition to exhibiting and selling work through galleries, Parr has also accepted commissions for editorial, fashion and advertising campaigns, most recently Gucci (2019). Martin Parr has gone viral.



Fig. 3 Aberdeen Football Club, Aberdeen, Scotland, by Martin Parr. 2017. (Courtesy the artist, Magnum Photos and Rocket Gallery).

As part of its Photography Season the National Museum Cardiff is presenting a selection of photographs that Parr took on his visits to Wales between 1975 and 2018. Parr is often referred to as a ‘chronicler of our times’,⁴ but the Museum’s decision to exhibit his images alongside Bernd and Hilla Becher’s meticulous inventory of industrial structures **FIG.4** and August Sander’s refined portraits from his series *People of the Twentieth Century* **FIG.5** – on display in two separate galleries – foregrounds just how different Parr’s take on ‘social documentary’ is. Like the vast majority of images in circulation today, which Nathan Jurgenson has defined as ‘social photography’,⁵ Parr’s images ‘perform functions distinct from

those of documentation or art'. Like the hundreds of images we scroll through every day and forget about the moment they disappear from our screens, Parr's innumerable snapshots of plates of food, sporting events, festivals and the seaside are cheap and forgettable. Even the way they have been displayed in Cardiff – unframed and fastened to the gallery wall with magnets – is suggestive of the ephemeral nature of photography in the age of social media.

What has been described as Parr's 'oblique approach to social documentary'⁶ seems to indicate not how he views his subjects but how he views photography itself: as a filter, a formula that can be applied, infinitely reproduced and sold (Parr has published over one hundred photobooks, many of which are revised or reworked versions of earlier editions). Parr's photographs now form part of the 'constantly growing flood of images released by the media',⁷ which is a constitutive part of the activities he has always been interested in: 'leisure, consumption and communication'. Indeed, Jurgenson argues that the social photograph is first and foremost a unit of communication,⁸ and in a world where 'everything is informational', where 'the line between what is media and what isn't is harder to locate', Martin Parr is an Influencer who is selling not a product but a message. So what exactly is he trying to say? According to the photographer Phillip Jones Griffiths, who strongly opposed Parr's acceptance to Magnum when he applied in the mid-1990s, he is saying nothing at all: 'His photographs titillate in some way, but the fact is that they are meaningless'.⁹



Fig. 4 Winding Towers, GB, by Bernd and Hilla Becher. 1966–67. (© Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher; courtesy Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur – Bernd und Hilla Becher Archive, Cologne, 2019).

To think Parr is making provocative and divisive, or highly shareable, work deliberately to make a statement about photography in the age of social media would be giving him too much credit. As Parr has said himself, he chooses his subjects because he finds them amusing.¹⁰ Photographers like Parr 'do more than just see the world as a collection of objects to capture; they simultaneously intuit a visual moment's eventual impact, what is provocative and catchy about it'.¹¹ From his privileged view from behind the camera – Parr's most recent photographs of visitors to the Welsh seaside are taken from his balcony using a telephoto lens **FIG.6** – 'people in public are objects to be claimed and exposed'. Like the images and videos that were shared by Remainers in January, Parr's sardonic photographs are popular largely because they reaffirm self-righteous voyeurs in their tastes, political affiliations and lifestyle choices. Like those viral tweets, Parr's photographs of the British working class are cheap shots that play on the virality that has come to define how we share images and to what end.



Fig. 5 Pastrycook [Konditor], by August Sander. 1928. (ARTIST ROOMS National Galleries of Scotland and Tate. Lent by Anthony d'Offay 2010; © Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur - August Sander Archiv, Cologne / DACS 2019; photograph National Galleries of Scotland).



Fig. 6 Tenby, Wales, by Martin Parr. 2018. (Courtesy the artist, Magnum Photos and Rocket Gallery).

Footnotes

- 1** See 'Is BBC news broken? And if so, how do we fix it?' *The Guardian* (26th May 2019), available at www.theguardian.com, accessed 2nd February 2020; R. Greenslade: 'Brexit bias? BBC faces a difficult balancing act in polarised nation', *The Guardian* (27th October 2019), available at www.theguardian.com/commentisfree, accessed 2nd February 2020; and P. Sawyer, S. Lumley and C. Hope: 'Broadcasters accused of bias against Brexit Day celebrations', *The Telegraph* (1st February 2020), available at www.telegraph.co.uk/news, accessed 2nd February 2020.
- 2** S. Gaston and P. Harrison-Evans: 'Mediating populism', *Demos* (5th March 2018), available at <https://www.demos.co.uk/>, accessed 3rd February 2020.
- 3** J. Berger and K.L. Milkman: 'What makes online content go viral?', *Journal of Marketing Research* 49, no.2 (April 2012), pp.192–205, esp. p.9.
- 4** See Thomas Weski's introduction to Martin Parr's work on the artist's website, available at www.martinparr.com/introduction, accessed 10th February 2020.
- 5** N. Jurgenson: *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media*, London and New York 2019.
- 6** See Martin Parr's biography, available at <https://www.martinparr.com/cv/>, accessed 10th February 2020.
- 7** See Thomas Weski's introduction to Martin Parr, *op. cit.* (note 5).
- 8** Jurgenson, *op. cit.* (note 5), p.9.

- 9** H. Anderson: 'Shooting star', *Prospect* (25th January 2012), available at www.prospectmagazine.co.uk, accessed 10th February 2020.
- 10** S. Moss: Interview: Martin Parr's 40 years in the life of Wales: "Let's face it – people are funny", *The Guardian* (14th October 2019), available at www.theguardian.com/artanddesign, accessed 10th February 2020.
- 11** Jurgenson, *op. cit.* (note 5), p.91.

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