Representing social decline

Investigating post industrialism and its effects on alcohol consumption habits 1983-2016 via the work of documentary photographers.

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Introduction

Establishments providing alcohol have often been the source of documentary photography, and for good reason: they have become markers to which changes in our society can be measured, for centuries the public house has been central to community life; 'It can be a place where networks are created, strengthened and extended' (PHD - Markham, 2014, p. 1). The pub, being a cultural and social hub (Johnson, 2015), gives insights into UK history, heritage and culture; they have been venues of celebration and to drown one's sorrows. However, a change in public behaviour has taken place over the last two decades and this study looks at the contributing factors which have left behind a time of civilised drinking[i], as photographically documented by Martin Parr in 1983, to a contrasting photograph by Peter Dench in 2014 and investigates the contributing factors of this change via its photographic documentation and its reference to social, economic and political influences.

Documentation of post industrialisation via photography of alcohol related past times.

In 1983 Martin Parr photographed an elderly lady dancing in a traditional Yates's Wine Lodge (Parr, 2016). Uninterested drinkers in the background pay the female no attention, the untouched glasses of beer further the notion that this outdated model has been consigned to history. The woman is isolated in the frame, akin to the subject of alcoholic past-times which was to become separated from society due to negative associated behaviours. Colour film may have been forgone

for black and white, creating a metaphor of ‘times past’, yet this sprightly lady of later years dances on with a smile regardless (Figure1).

In contrast Peter Dench’s image from ‘A & E Alcohol and England (Dench, 2014) also shows a female dancing; this woman is crouched low, dress see-through in the light of the flash, showing the black thong she wears beneath her dress (Fig 2). Her face close to the man’s crotch dancing nearby gives the scene a sexual connotation, suggesting a social narrative that has taken place within society in the years between the images being taken; it’s as if Parr could foresee the changes about to take place in the coming decades and purposely chose to create an epitaph for a moral standard which was about to change forever.

In 1980 the Thatcherite Conservative party had taken power and there was concern within the public due to major social-economic changes; in 1981 recession hit and unemployment rose at its peak to 3,100,000 in 1984 (Snowdon, 2014). The miner’s strike erupted in March causing conflict between trade unions and government; police were heavily criticised for strong-arm tactics reducing working class support for the government; the general mood of the public sombre[1] giving Parr’s 1984 image more context as the wine lodge is virtually empty and contains patrons older than 35 years of age-excluding the younger generation. After the strike, the Conservatives gained more dominance over the economy and welfare (Pettinger, 2013). In 1987 unemployment finally fell below 3,000,000 but many still couldn’t find work; opponents of the government claimed the ‘North South divide’ was increasing as industrial areas were closing down. Other trades felt the pressures too: by now alcohol consumption was rising but the number of pubs closing was increasing. Chris Coekin studied the demise of Northern working mens clubs in ‘Knock Three Times’ (2006), where most of the images contain older generations (Fig 3), illustrating the widening of not only the North/South divide[2], but also the generations purely by their absence in the images.

[1] Also see Killip, P – In Flagrante (1988). Documentary photography studying North East Britain during transition to post-industry society

[2] South UK clubs were still well attended at the time and South East UK still currently has the highest concentration

‘It was noted that socio-economic restructuring in the late 1980s also resulted in changing patterns of consumption in working-class communities in the North East of England, with the decline in traditional working-class occupations linked to the decline in traditional beer drinking by mixed-age groups of male workers’. (Gofton, 1990 p18)

Gofton’s study suggested that if no experience is available to young men drinking with colleagues and peers, they lack the necessary knowledge of how to drink alcohol in a civilised manner, with so many out of work this was becoming to be the case; lacking structure, young people become disconnected from familial groups and the masses, ‘becoming increasingly fragmented and individualised’ (Brain, 2005, p. 263). Sam Taylor-Wood photographed a young male striding the streets of London in Soliloquy V (1986), the road in the background empty, the subject blurred as he moves, head down, past rubbish bags and shuttered windows. The lone man representing how the generation of the 80’s often felt; either hunter or hunted amongst the ‘yuppie’ filled city streets. ‘Lager Lout’ was another term coined, describing out of control young male drinkers causing trouble on UK streets, generally considered unemployed and a threat to society. ‘There was national concern about youthful drink-related disorder which was widely covered by the press in terms of the phenomenon of ‘lager louts’, a phrase first coined in the summer of 1988 (Brain, 2005, p. 264). Dench’s image of a baseball capped male would suit the public perception of a Lager Lout (Dench, 2014) he stands alone in the centre of the frame, one arm raised in possible surprise; the other to reduce the flow of blood which has also stained his clothing. This representation certainly adheres to the public conception; the camera documenting the stereotypical description; clothing, gender and assumed status (Figure 4), but unlike previous stereotypes regarding alcohol such as Brandt or Cartier-Bresson, this figure looks more like a bloody Matador[3] (Fig 5) photographed by Rineke Dijkstra (1994); Dench’s subjects partially covered face doesn’t show the concern that could be predicted under the circumstances; indicating the individual could be under the influence of alcohol, perhaps showing Dench his

[3] Matadors contrasted with mother’s post birth, photographed by Rineke Dijkstra (1994)

wounds, telling the story of how they were inflicted rather than inspecting himself. Coekin's observations on the demise of working men's clubs has become a reflection on society itself as the decline in values of the younger generations continued and would continue to do so some twenty years later.

Tillmans, Gursky and also Rineke Dijkstra in her project 'The Buzz Club' (1996/1997. Fig 6) captured the youth of the 1990's as another recession hit due to 'Lawson's boom' in the late 80's (Pettinger, 2013), many younger generations having missed out on guidance, social and environmental influences were restless and distanced. This aided the attraction of the drugs and dance scene captured by photographers Tillmans et al. Originally it was considered the scene involved only a small percentage of young people (Shiner, 1999, pp. 139-159) and it would not last very long, but as documented, it was embraced by large numbers; Tillmans himself stated 'my generation had overcome the cold war and were coming together in a new spirit of inclusion' (O'Hagan, 2017) indicating a generation suffering from PTSD, looking to find bonds with each other. During this period, a form of 'normalisation' to drug culture took place resulting in a wider acceptance of stimulants by the younger generation. As a way to bring custom back to the pubs manufacturers designed products that would appeal to the drug taking clients it had lost out on in the form of high strength beers and alcopops. Breweries and Pubco's redesigned sites from traditional 'spit and sawdust' to 'cocktails and chrome' enticing the 18–35 demographic (Brain, 2005). This upgrading brought back clientele but also brought behaviour patterns of a group of 'free spirits' partying high on drugs, with little or no policing and an altered moral regard, encouraging a hedonistic generation (Brain, 2005). By 1993 the political scene also 'upgraded': the recession over and John Major now in control of the conservative party with Tony Blair elected to Labour party leader (Tilley, 2015), unemployment reduced, but hedonistic values proved harder to change (Brain, 2005, p. 267). 1997 saw the conservatives lose power to Blair's 'New Labour' and within a year unemployment had fallen to 1,300,000 (Snowdon, 2014), with minimum wage introduced to help those on low incomes support for the party was increasing but the precedent

had been set. Anders Petersen's documentation of Café Lehmitz (Petersen, 2013) and its inhabitant's debauchery was being brought back to life, but instead of the café housing a small number of carefree individuals (Figure 5), the conditions in the UK had created a whole generation of such identities.

By 2000 long gone were the days of having 'one too many' as one could picture Brandt's 'Man in Pub' (1946) suffering from. The flat capped working class male, smiling at the bar with a full glass of ale (Figure 7), the UK had evolved into Parr's 'A girls Friday night out on the town' (Parr, 2009) containing four female drinkers wearing immaculate makeup, dyed hair meticulously styled, drinking wine in a bar advertising its wares with shining blue light as if the products themselves hold a godly aura (Figure 8), its only competition in the room the shining clothing worn by the subjects. Town centres had become a playground for 18-30 year olds (Brain, 2005) The media were reporting on 'no go areas' in town centres after ten thirty, alcohol consumption had become critical to the creation of night-time economies in the UK, with the formation of a new alcohol order catering for young, diverse consumers, who were drug wise when compared to the traditional male industrial working-class pub patron, pushing the UK to a post-industrial alcoholic order (Brain, 2005, p. 267), getting drunk was now the aim of an evening's entertainment rather than an accidental bi product of drinking too much. This comparison of Brandt and Parr shows the change in social attitudes to alcohol, its uses and public behaviour; popping in for a 'quick one' after work, had morphed into an elaborate ritual of preparation, styling and expectation, Parr was documenting a consumer society, ready to sell itself.

However, Brandt and Parr 's work are not the only contrasts; they do not exist exclusively between different artists and time periods, but also within images by the same photographer at the same time and locations; differing public behaviours and space can be viewed in Parr's Black Country Stories (Parr, 2014). Primarily, evidence within both photographs show that loud music is not contusive to conversation, showing the changing roles of bars and how community communication

is affected by these changes. The first image shows a traditional pub, with its ‘magnolia’ walls, wires hanging from the ceiling above a mirror which is the background to a number of people dancing (Figure 9). One man, arms held up his face absorbed in the moment inadvertently shows fellow dancers his stomach as his shirt rides up uncaring. The woman beside him casually attired, hair tied back, also ‘lost in the rhythm’ contrasts greatly with another from the same series; This image is taken in one of Yates modern ‘chrome and cocktail’ venues; the mirror is replaced with a large TV, the walls painted red and artwork upon them show the difference in venue styles. It too includes a subject with arms held high whilst dancing (Figure 10), the woman wears heavy makeup, large amounts of styled hair show effort before leaving the home and an outfit which has taken thought and consideration specifically for the night. She performs, engaging the camera, giving the impression that attention is the point of her efforts, reinforcing the notion she has not gone out just to consume alcohol and dance, but something more; Parr not only contrasts locations and personal/social goals, but also the social activities and spaces compared with his 1984 image.

In 2014 Peter Dench published a collection summing up the previous two decades social decline; the establishments alcohol was sold in and the activities associated with consumption had changed dramatically further adding evidence to Parr’s observations. Dench’s Alcohol and England (2014), included a photograph of a sexual act taking place in public (Figure 11). It is difficult to tell if it is consented, which makes the scene testing to evaluate, sending the narrative in one of two directions. Would moral codes of 1983 consider acceptable the dress of the female attire? The unbuttoned shirt of the male in public? The possible acceptance of the situation on behalf of the female, the act being carried out by the male, or the fact that it is being carried out in such a public space? Essentially it asks who the couple in the photograph are, why do they feel it is appropriate behaviour or, why do we ask these questions in the first place; what makes makes this morally wrong. It leaves a lot to be interpreted by the viewer and raises questions as to what

is, isn't, or should, be acceptable behaviour in public. More importantly it shows the turbulent journey from 1983 to 2014 via comparison of Parr's and Dench's differing works.

Conclusion

Gofton's study commented on the need for guidance through teaching by our peers and seniors; however, as the photographers mentioned here have proven, that example is now given by those that come from a social field that carved their own way through post-industrial UK.

The photographs of Brandt, Coekin and Parr's earlier works are now symbolic of a social identity about to be disappear, or simply a community service the majority no longer needs. Without these images, we have no measure of positive and negative change, history or place. They have documented not only what they show in ethical and indexical ways, but also a story not initially seen within the frame.

Beginning in Parr's innocent appearing, yet troubled 1980's, through Dijkstra's experimental 90's leading into the consumer society documented by Parr, resulting in Dench's bleak observation of the UK masses in the late 2000's. This post-industrial landscape which has shaped many of the attitudes to alcohol and social pastimes continues to be of concern to public and authorities. Alcohol misuse has become the biggest element for death, ill-health or disability between 15-49 year-olds, costing the NHS an estimated £3.5 billion annually[4]. 'The number of people between the ages of 60-74 admitted to hospitals with mental and behavioural disorders associated with alcohol has risen by over 150%' (WHO, 2014), an age group that would have experienced the development of post-industrial Britain captured by Parr in the 1980's.[ii]

However, as Riis[iii] brought awareness to insalubrious and overcrowded housing in 1889 (Franklin, 2016), or Ian Berry's 'Sharpeville massacre's[iv] (1960) images being used as evidence in court show (James, 2015), artists like Dench, Parr and others offer an evidential view, a reference recording of the social field, raising awareness and highlighting the positive and negative aspects

[4] (Snowdon, 2014)

of our lives. Therefore, there is still hope that what appears to be a declining sense of community represented by the works mentioned here can affect change

Documentary photographer Jim Mortram sums up the need for documentary photography; “I’d look at mainstream media and see no reflection of the realities I see portrayed within it” (Smythe, 2017), photographic documentations can encourage change helping to make the masses and authorities aware of the dangers to which they face; documentary photography is one of the most valid tools in media and art today; therefore, making it the perfect vehicle in aiding the reversal of social decline suffered since Brandt and Parr’s historical messages .

Practice based research: A in E. Alcohol in Emergency; Methodology and Key influences.

The photographers mentioned have referenced discourse, showing society no longer requires community, due to this hundreds of empty structures now stand across the UK (Snowdon, 2014). An icon known throughout the world (Johnson, 2015) should be documented in the same way the behaviours that lead, in part, to its demise.

The Becher’s documented buildings of architectural beauty or importance, therefore it is fitting to suggest buildings with heritage be treated in the same way; they not only sold alcohol, but also hold stories; gun powder and assignation plots, football wins and the mourning of departed loved ones have all taken place within. Artists such as the Becher’s or Gursky capture architecture objectively, displaying structures shot in typologies or as ever stretching expanses of human space; Gursky in particular hints at concealed interactions (Jansen, 2017), a notion in keeping with the motif of the hidden stories inside a pub. It was this reason I chose to document shuttered and closed pubs in this style and investigate the human stories behind each building. The typographical style of the Becher’s, gives an almost antiseptic quality; every image almost objectively identical, devoid of life, “their work provided an early research tool and resource for industrial archaeologists” (Lange, 2005, p. 6); a fitting anecdote to the colourful and brash aesthetics of Parr and Dench (Parr, 1989). I was aware of two sites of which I took test shots, then

used social media asking contacts if they knew any others. I visited the pubs with copies of my tests in order to create each image as close in composition as the last, therefore maintaining the typographic representation. I chose to use the Becher's indexical influence to create images based in pictorialism akin to the images found in Industrial Facades (1995) which could suit the collection if the Becher's had wished, rather than the large expanses of Gursky or the detailed interiors of Hofer as I feel the images need to adhere to evidential concepts.

I utilised forums[5] and contacts with local knowledge to find personal stories/views of each site to include within my publication; adding a human element to a subject initially appearing to be devoid creating a written form of Gursky's narratives; communities lost places to connect, many lost jobs because of the closures (Snowdon, 2014), some contained stories of crime (Browning, 2015); which I feel needs to be included to illustrate the costs to society. Each site was researched to find time of closure, sizes, locations and also any possible clues as to why the closure occurred; location, competition, management or financial reasons were all researched. Research methods include reading online specialist forums, database searches of local newspapers, Companies house archives and real estate sales companies. Through the forums I was able to secure two interviews with past patrons who were able to give me more information on two of the pubs; this was very useful as I was able to then research particular points in two of the sites histories; giving deeper understanding and stronger context to the work.

[5] Beerintheevening.com tripadvisor.com kentonline.com whatpub.co.uk

A in E. Alcohol in Emergency - Web address

https://paulwicksblog.wordpress.com/2017/11/16/independant-research-project/

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Endnotes

[i] A term used by many UK government's when setting out laws and acts to combat drinking related issues stemming from the 1751gin act.

[ii] For non-alcohol related reference to post-industrial UK see Killip, P – In Flagrante (1988). Documentary photography studying North East Britain during transition to post-industry society.

[iii] Riis, J. 'How the other half lives' (1890) documented immigrants including himself in New York's East side slum. Considered a land mark in reform bringing attention to the issues faced by residents and bringing about change.

[iv] Magnum Photographer Ian Berry's photographs were to used prove victim's innocence in court during the 1960 Sharpeville massacre trial.