

# *Ad Limine: Martin Parr's Humans on the Beach. Re-empowering the English Seaside Resorts as Pop Culture*



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**Abstract:** In the 1960s, the British working class gradually replaced the coastal landscape with the beaches of the Mediterranean. The coastal resorts of England experienced a decline and a transformation into “toxic” places, *ad limine*. The paper investigates British coastal culture as a source of hybrid narratives. Developing the work of Ingleby and Kerr (*Coastal Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century*, Edinburgh UP, 2018), it discusses the visual coastal stories of Martin Parr to understand his view of Britishness. Parr’s photographs investigate places that witnessed the empowerment and profound transformation of the English working-class identity. He provides a non-judgmental analysis of humans performing universal and ritual actions in his coloured and saturated shots that evoke impressionist beach painting. The photographs represent the English northern beach as a bright and glossy place in contrast with the political and cultural issues faced by the British working class during the last decades of the past century.

**Keywords:** beach culture, Martin Parr, Britishness, cultural history, visual culture, narrative culture, pop culture.

**Résumé :** Dans les années 1960, la classe ouvrière britannique a progressivement préféré les plages de la Méditerranée au littoral de la Grande Bretagne. En Angleterre, les stations balnéaires ont alors connu le déclin et se sont transformées en lieux « toxiques », *ad limine*. Cet article étudie la culture côtière britannique comme source de récits hybrides. À partir du travail d’Ingleby et Kerr (*Coastal Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century*, Edinburgh UP, 2018), il s’intéresse aux récits graphiques que Martin Parr offre de la côte britannique pour mieux comprendre sa vision de la britannicité. Les photographies de Parr explorent des lieux qui ont été témoins de

*l'empowerment* et de la profonde transformation de l'identité de la classe ouvrière anglaise. Dans ses clichés colorés et saturés évoquant les peintures de plage impressionnistes, l'artiste propose une analyse qui refuse de juger ces humains dont les actions sont universelles et rituelles. Ses photographies représentent la plage du Nord de l'Angleterre comme un endroit éclatant de lumière, ce qui contraste singulièrement avec les problèmes politiques et culturels auxquels la classe ouvrière britannique a été confrontée au cours des dernières décennies du siècle passé.

**Mots-clés :** culture de plage, Martin Parr, britannicité, histoire culturelle, culture visuelle, culture narrative, culture populaire.

## The starting point

Many factors redefined British culture in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Post-war Britain created a new post-colonial identity by 'exporting' the English language worldwide, while fashion, music, and pop culture became universal points of reference for the new generations. At home, a new idea of Britishness spread among the popular and middle classes with television comedies and tabloids that exposed private lives, created celebrities, and represented the national character with new symbolic objects. 'Pop creativeness' competed with the idea of 'good old Britain'. Tradition and modernity faced each other and redefined the narrative of nationhood as the political opposition between the Labour and the Conservative parties soared (Heath, Pottle, 2005; Black, 2010; Beckett, 2015; Black, Pemberton, Thane, 2013; Lawrence, 2013).

The 1980s witnessed clashing ideologies and divisive personalities, including football for the masses, pop music and fundraising, MTV, and private television channels. Scandal, violence, and morality found their way into television comedies and the press. Margaret Thatcher changed how people related to the establishment: traditional social classes were questioned, only to be replaced by new forms of social division. Feminism, race, and sexual orientation grouped the British on a new basis. The decade witnessed the rise of yuppies, dinkies and woopies while advertising became the pivot of mass culture. Market strategies manipulated social habits. Pubs served white wine along with ale. As fashion became a vital aspect of this new culture, American icons and glossy colours, unisex and skinny attire matched oversized jumpers and shoulder pads. Leisure and sport were synonyms of wellbeing and health while people re-imagined their holidays as many flew to exotic resorts (Hill, Metcalfe, 2003).

The British working class gradually replaced the domestic coastal landscape with the beaches of the Mediterranean. Progressively, the

coastal resorts of England experienced a decline and turned into places, *ad limine*. Places that were marginal compared to the urban environment, but because of their marginality, they preserved Britishness in the forms of significant objects, architecture and memories (Walton, 2000).

By adopting the perspective of discourse studies, the paper investigates British coastal culture as a source of liminal narratives. By developing the work of Ingleby and Kerr (2018), I will consider examples from the visual coastal stories of Martin Parr and how they represent the idea of Britishness<sup>1</sup>. In his long career, Parr has shown a particular interest in beaches. His photographs generally investigate places that witnessed the empowerment and profound transformation of the English working class with its cultural and racial (white) identity. Beaches flatten diversity; bodies are exposed in their nature: on the beach, one can always spot people who share habits and cultural symbols, yet each photograph is unique in spotting an object or a detail quintessentially British.<sup>2</sup>

Parr's beach photography collects glossy, colourful images in which the author ironically presents the place and its rituals (sunbathing, beauty contests, picnicking, street food, arcade games) as typical British rites. The books he dedicates to beach photography explore holiday life between bad taste and absurdity, kitsch and the most genuine humanity, which all of us express when we ease up and relax on holiday. We observe an indulgent and comprehensive gaze of humans yearning for freedom and ritual actions in coloured and saturated shots. The photographs represent the windy English beach as a sparkling place, in contrast with the political and cultural issues faced by the British working class during the 1970s and 1980s. They testify to social change and the recreation of national identity.

In the following paragraphs, I will first describe the symbolic value of the beach in British culture from a historical perspective, and then I will examine samples of symbolic cultural objects in Parr's photographs and their function as narrative elements of his stories. Interestingly, some of these objects were recurrent items in Impressionist beach paintings. I do not argue that Parr reproduces the Impressionist beach scenarios on purpose, and I acknowledge that the comparison may seem farfetched, but the presence of recurrent items on the beach points to the persistence of

1. Martin Parr is a documentary photographer. His books collect photographs that encapsulate details that document the lives of people. The colour and the situation though are picked up among a set of shots, which means that Parr decided which one best represents an idea. Rather than mere representation of reality, there is interpretation at the level of composition and of the technical aspects of light, contrast, focus, editing etc. The subsequent organization in a photo book creates a narrative around a topic. More about his approach can be seen in the documentary and interviews available on his website and freely available on YouTube (for example: [https://youtu.be/9KA\\_qm7HWgo](https://youtu.be/9KA_qm7HWgo); <https://youtu.be/ibqDOm3i0eA>; <https://youtu.be/MCRyB2SFQZ4>).
2. See: <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/martin-parr-interview-only-human-national-portrait-gallery-brexit-britain>.

*topoi* in the imaginary that modernity has built around the beach. The distance and cultural difference of these works shed light on the ritualism associated with beach life and the universal relevance of the beach environment in Modernity (Triani, 1988).

In fact, around 1870, there was a rapid increase in the creation of bourgeois holiday resorts. The health implications of bathing gradually lost importance, while its social significance became fundamental. Evidence of this change can be found in the works of numerous painters who made the bourgeoisie at the beach the subject of many scenes of social life. The habits and customs that characterise the daily life of people colonised a new and decidedly unusual space: the beach and its surroundings were then equipped with some comforts and indispensable objects: the parasol, the book, the comb, the chair, the tent, the stroller pointing at a progressive integration and display of the intimate life, the corporeal dimension in particular, and public life (Corbin, 1988; Rubini, 1994).

### The objects



The last century is segmented into decades associated with specific cultural phenomena. The 1960s saw the rise of pop culture, baby boomers and the Vietnam War. We imagine the 1970s as the decade of feminism, environmental consciousness, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. In contrast, the 80s are symbolised by hedonism, videogames, the Aids epidemic, and the fall of the Berlin Wall (Vinen, 2010: 103 -110).

In this perspective, cultural movements are equally crucial as political events. At a personal level, we may also populate our imagination with well-defined objects, symbols, and recurrent themes that we associate with the decade and circumstances significant to us. On the one hand, personal imagination is created by memories and individual experiences. Conversely, the media amplify recursive pictures that fuel personal imagination and understanding of a period. This 'myth-making' process testifies to the extreme richness and the rapid change in habits, social relations, and lifestyles characterising the century. Furthermore, the notion of culture has been extended to phenomena that are not exclusively related to the arts but comprise ideas of health, food, and social relationship that were previously irrelevant. In this perspective, disciplines like cultural history construe time and space as separated from wars or significant political events, forefronting all the material and immaterial objects that characterise a specific decade (Burke, 2004).

After Roland Barthes published *Mythologies* (1957), the semiotics of objects focused on the role of real objects in defining culture. Barthes proposed an investigation of human nature, right from the interpretation of habits and behaviours that surround us. His semiology turned ‘trivia’ into subjects of academic investigation: cars, national dishes, plastic toys and kitchenware, sports, and, of course, everything in the sphere of fashion that could be the subject of advertising was scrutinised and investigated as a testimony to culture (Barthes, 1957). In Barthes’ view (1964), mass society develops meaningful symbolic objects. In practice, an object’s concrete function is absorbed by a more or less implicit meaning that people share and develop as a collective body (Barthes, 1970). For this reason, history is a narrative that involves personal memories, impressions, and recollected experiences. Objectivity is an academic necessity that needs to face the *other* history, *i.e.* the history of the masses.

Mass culture redefined its identity in the aftermath of the two world wars. The totalitarian regimes had granted the masses a special position in the organisation of society; propaganda used symbolic communication to mould the masses and shape political ideas.<sup>3</sup> Schools were central, and activities like sports, cinema, and newspapers supported the regimes by developing meaning around symbols (Postoutenko, 2010). After World War II, the trend continued, boosted by fast economic growth. TV, in particular, made visual culture pervasive and placed cultural objects into a broader system of relations, thus identifying new functions in both the instrumental and the symbolic sense (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2010).

Photography also played a significant role in adding meaning to cultural objects. The network of relations established by advertising and how photojournalism has interpreted 20<sup>th</sup>-century history is unique. Both created infinite interpretations and roles for symbolic cultural fetishes: not surprisingly, photo narratives are one of the most debated aspects of contemporary historical research, given their political and ideological role in shaping mass cultures. While Barthes emphasised the importance of personal experience (*punctum*) in evaluating photography, images have disclosed their communicative function for marginal social groups and specific generations. Images are a shared experience, not personal, in their powerful myth-making. They freeze the object’s significance and pass it on to personal and collective memory. They testify to the political gaze of the photographer who may act in line or against ideologies: whatever the

3. It is well known that the beach became a special place in fascist imaginary. Documentaries praised Mussolini’s holidays on the Riviera Romagnola and vacation camps for children were a potent tool of propaganda, social cohesion and development for the urban working classes. See: Dogliani, Patrizia, “Environment and Leisure in Italy during Fascism”, *Modern Italy*, 19(3), 2014, 247–59 (doi:10.1080/13532944.2014.940152).

perspective, they augment imagination (Barthes, 1957; Moran, 2005: 1-28; Niola 2012: 10-11).

In general, the mythographic repertoire of the century has constantly been updated with our active participation as consumers. In his photographs, Parr depicts this process of ‘enrichment’ of the imagination. The narratives he creates are encapsulated in minor details, i.e. the objects placed as foci of the image remind us of class, age, and peculiar habits. They may look like fragments, but they have a lot to tell about the personality of the subject, the situation in which he/she is caught etc. By spotting the odd, he reveals the truth (Mellor, 2007).

Indeed, the emergence of everyday life as a myth-maker has progressively developed into a super-production of myths. The pervasiveness of the media, which profoundly affects the sensitive sphere of experience, is responsible for the availability of competing narratives around the same symbolic objects. This is combined with a rapid propagation of myths and their deterioration. This hyper-communication enhanced by the widespread use of images results in overexposure in everyday life; the phenomenon can be seen in embryos in Parr’s 1980s beach images. The beach is a space of consumption: a public space that is dynamic and sensitive to the habits they help to spread. A beach is a place for the spectacular staging of goods and a pole of social attraction. Beaches are places of collective blending and disorientation, magnifiers of the virtues and defects of our time.

### Decades for the people



In Britain, the aftermath of WWII was dominated by trauma, sad memories, economic insecurity, and food rationing, which continued well into the 1950s. No international leisure travel was permitted during wartime, and domestic travel was discouraged. Currency allowance was also introduced so that money could not be spent abroad on travel but with solid limitations to preserve and restore the national reserve. Government control over the money spent on holidays abroad continued well into the 70s and was the object of debate both from an economic perspective and a social one, as it limited freedom of movement and prevented the low and middle classes from becoming tourists (Oliver, 1971). Consequently, foreign travel remained except for the majority of the population. Domestic travel remained the main option: once the barbed wires and the mines scattered on the South-Eastern coasts were removed, the coastline was returned to the public. Trains commuting from London to the beach allowed people to rest during the weekend and bank holidays,

although the summer season enlivened coastal villages and small towns like Weston-super-Mare, Hastings, Worthing, Eastbourne, Bournemouth, Brighton, Torbay, and Broadstairs, among the others. However, it took time to recover from war poverty and restore hotels and facilities to leisure as they had often been converted during the war as lodgings for the troops (Sladen, 2002).

In practice, only at the end of the 50s, the economic situation allows people to change their attitude toward leisure and save time and money for a holiday. Personal and family incomes increased as the post-war economy recovered, creating the circumstances and context for spending on goods such as cars, television, and leisure. Demand for domestic holidays continued to grow, but by the mid-60s, more people began to travel abroad, and coastal destinations saw the first traces of decline. While day trips remained, for the most part, domestic and grounded on the south-eastern beaches or in the central-northern countryside, the long holiday trips turned to the modern facilities in the sunny destinations of the Mediterranean (Andrews, 2011).

As long as domestic holidays were popular, these places continued to be refurbished with symbolic architecture. Georgian terraces, marine villas with gothic or oriental details, promenades, decorative railings, bandstand near the pleasure piers stretching into the sea, decorative benches, welcome shelters, and colourful beach huts that had dotted the Victorian coastline continued to be used and restored. In time, other architectures appeared: brutalist car parks, indoor leisure centres, ballrooms, ice cream, and street food kiosks dotted the landscape, adding to a sense of modern kitsch. The first casino opened in the luxury Metropole Hotel Brighton in 1962, adding to the list of pleasures along with donkey rides and boat trips: change in the architecture progressed with change in the type of leisure that people looked for and the kind of lifestyle that they wanted to experience during their spare time. The result was a unique mixture of old and new, tradition and modernity blended with some confusion (Ferry, 2009).

In the late 1960 and 1970s, the typical beach leisure environment faced a substantial improvement in accommodation, increasing comfort, food, and entertainment availability. Piers generally offered a more comprehensive set of amusements ranging from slot machines to auditoriums hosting tea dances and live music. Seaside theatres, pavilions, music halls, and variety shows were also offered seasonally. Moreover, open-air swimming pools, boating lakes, boat trips, rides on horses, and mini-golf completed the offer, along with beauty contests, are all events that fuelled the imagination of holidaymakers well into the 1980s. Strolling along the promenades and sitting or lying on the beaches sunbathing, observing

other people, chatting, eating french fries, and icecreams were also engaging activities for any age. Places and architecture became symbolic as they networked the idea of leisure and indicated social relations and conflicts within class identity. Oppositions such as rural/urban, north/south, working class and the middle classes, and immigrants vs natives reshaped British society as one or the other element emerged as the leading force of change (McSmith, 2010; Jones, 2010; Jones, 2012).

In sum, the beach turned from a place for the better ones to anybody who comprised the white lower classes. Change in the imaginary and identity of this social class went hand in hand with the progressive abandonment of these places handed over to (white) retired people and immigrant families looking for cheap affordable holidays. The beach became a place where classes ebbed and flowed, moving to and from modernity to tradition. The objects representing the beach holiday lifestyle moved from new to old as high street shops gave way to charity shops collecting paraphernalia of the good old days (Smith, 2004; Price, Narchi, 2018).

In the 1980s, the UK underwent a large-scale reorganisation of its economic system, transforming the country, landscape, and social relations for good (Johnston, 2000). These changes involved the progressive decline of the industrial sector, which was taken over by the service industries. It was as if the City and the London area concentrated on a new workforce: commuting became the norm, and the North was forced into severe deindustrialisation. The transformation that followed left a large section of the skilled and semi-skilled manual labour force either without employment or in temporary and insecure jobs. In parallel, a new economy based on the provision of services (often the finance industry) enabled a young generation with university education to significantly improve their living standards. The North of the country and Wales witnessed the decline of the mining industry. London extended its influence more than ever before as the place for the financial élites. The country's geography reflected a polarisation between deprived populations living in the de-industrialised areas and the service class with high salaries afforded a multicultural networked London lifestyle. The death of traditional industrial complexes in the North left whole areas of the country almost de-populated. The change also affected the coast and its resorts which looked unattractive to the rich and unaffordable to the new poor (Newton, 2017; Mann, Fenton, 2017, 71-97)

As for the landscape, the gentrification of dismissed urban areas created a new geography of places to buy leisure. Abandoned factories were turned into shopping centres, theme parks, or heritage sites for tourism. This involved 'theming' places – designing and advertising a place as a marketable concept – the consequence of the gentrification of villages

and small towns. Clusters of abandoned period houses could be seen next to malls facing a constant shop turnover—places with no real economy but services that waxed and waned according to the number of residents. (Urry, Larsen, 2011; Kearns, Philo, 1993).

The progressive decay of the leisure economy turned them into cheap localities for white pensioners from the public sector. The beaches were for the elderly connecting to their idea of Britishness as it was rooted in their personal experience of youth. They experienced it as young and physically connected to their interpretation of it. In practice, the national past was indexed by the buildings and the simple activities that symbolised British heritage, fuelling the imagination of these generations. Coastal resorts concentrated on these symbols, connecting them to the Victorian past or the recent pop memorabilia so much loved by the boomers born in the 1960s (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 2017).

## Life is a beach

### Parr’s view

Parr is a documentary photographer as, decade after decade, he testified for social change.<sup>4</sup>

In the mid-1980s, he moved on from mainstream black and white to colour and flashlight, which produced an intense, saturated palette that is his unmistakable style. His compositions focus on real-life scenes where the details are forefronted as the symbols of consumerism, eccentricity, and the bitter-sweet fact that the flashy and glossy world around us may hide distress, sadness, and poverty as well. Thus the key to his photography is light that may disclose the pure pleasure of gazing at humans or a deep sense of tragedy (Williams, 2014).<sup>5</sup>

Parr’s shots of the English beaches display a series of vivid, hyper-realistic images in which a cruel gaze highlights the contradictions of the 1980s. The typical rituals of beach life are recorded with biting humour and ferocity at the same time. However, the artificiality of the scenery created by the saturated colours brings out a story beyond the visible. Here

4. See <https://jamesmaherphotography.com/historical-photography-articles/history-photography-martin-parr>.
5. As Parr declared “With photography, I like to create fiction out of reality. I try and do this by taking society’s natural prejudice and giving this a twist”. See <https://www.magnumphotos.com/photographer/martin-parr>.

we see gleaming pictures of people knotted into their own lives. A stain on a dress, a belly brimming over the costume, blue nails and reddish lips, baldness, and hair growth are turned into glamorous markers of ordinary life. Extracted from the ordinary, they construe people with such clarity and authenticity than any word could. They show life's beauty and sadness (Williams, 2004, 156-157).

The beach is more than a setting. It is a mood and a way of being. Humans on the beach exist despite class and norms. Individuals matter even if they are plunged into a mass. Food, colourful dresses, paraphernalia, plastic rubbish, and iconic objects crowd around *the people*. Strollers and children, the old and the young are caught while eating, resting, sleeping on the beach, walking on the promenade, waiting at a bus stop, and acting freely in their leisure time.

In Parr's words, "You can read a lot about a country by looking at its beaches: across cultures, the beach is that rare public space in which all absurdities and quirky national behaviour can be found" (Parr, 2013: 3). Humans are part of the landscape in the photographs, but something is always incoherent. Something peculiar that stirs the interest of the photographer and triggers the narrative. Something that indicates the *mythologie* of the place and the contrast with reality.

For example, strollers do not just carry babies; they are parked next to babies as if carrying the burden of their life: grinning faces, cries, and a mess surrounding them indicates something else. Babies and their strollers are out of place, dragged along the beach, stuck in corners where they seem in danger, such as a bus stop, a shelter on the promenade or, even worse to contemporary eyes, left under the sun surrounded by plastic dishes, cans, bottles, and food waste (Scott-Samuel *et al.*, 2014: ii.; Brown, 2018). From sunburnt skin to fatty food, what was acceptable in the past looks now dangerous, unhealthy behaviour, but it is the epitome of a decade that we recall with a mix of attraction and disgust. Looking at those behaviours, we feel a sense of unrest or sympathy and nostalgia, if age permits. People who experienced the holidays of the 1970s and 1980s can now look back at those experiences as part of their personal history, reviving sensations and renewing their memory— something that shows the importance of the viewer in the construction of the photographic narrative. Younger viewers may feel surprised or outraged by the same situations.

Technically speaking, the sensation of unrest is created by the sharp contrast of the colours, which forefronts the presence of scattered garbage, for example, or the unpleasant imperfection of the real bodies. The odd grimacing faces or the distracted outlook of the characters all reveal the contradictions of the characters: feeling the push to find a place in society,

or not living the life one would deserve but ‘dreaming it all’, and pretending to be pop stars.

Sometimes the eccentricity of the scene suggests disorder. One feels embarrassed and intrigued: is there any beauty? Parr’s holidaymakers act instinctively; they connect to other humans in a promised land of pretended freedom. Far from being a place of escapism, the beach brings humans to the brim of something undefined: another time, another space, somewhere, somehow, a grotesque dimension.

Grotesque designates everything bizarre, extravagant, ridiculous, gulf, monstrous, and deformed. The hyperrealism of Parr’s photography turns grotesque as the photographs are neither jokingly comic nor painfully tragic, but both: paradoxical and surreal, artificial, absurd, deforming people. The beach is not a romantic environment but a place of deviation.

Human bodies have focused on art, cultural and political theorising since the 1960s: photography witnessed bodies in revolt, politicised bodies, bodies exposed by the artistic gesture, and finally, bodies plasticised by the consumerism of the 1980s. Parr’s photography may also be understood in the light of this interest in the corporeal dimension. His sunburned bodies and the staring faces, fatty adults and the elderly in their plain attires, white skirts irradiating light, plastic shoes, and puffy hairstyles adorn bodies in a way that we now perceive as grotesque even if it was the habit and the fashion of the time (Haynes, 2002; Hoving, 2003). From a Foucaultian perspective, the moment the subject is placed within economic relations is also placed within a network of power relations. In Parr’s beach photography, holidaymakers are consumers belonging to a confused, rackless, uneducated state, and their grotesque posing makes them vulnerable and exposed.

*The Last Resort* is a series of forty photographs taken in New Brighton, a beach suburb of Liverpool, between 1983 and 1985 that was harshly criticised for the bourgeois exposure of working-class misery (Chambefort-Kay, 2018). It represents the first example of his colour beach photography developed in many other works. In the 1980s, *The Last Resort* was interpreted as a display of all the damages done to social cohesion and growth by the market-led economic policies of Margaret Thatcher. Some critics understood Parr’s photographs of the coastal resorts as pictures of poverty with a patronising attitude towards the working class that was untouchable and ‘pure’ from a left-wing perspective.

Val Williams, instead, highlights the unconventional perspective typical of Parr and the idea that social classes have been flattened by modernity. What matters is not income but the human condition. The

social norms that were respected and typified by British society disappeared and turned into something different. According to the perspective adopted, one can identify with consumerism or multiculturalism or many other *-isms* that changed from the roots of the idea of tradition. Parr's photography seems to interpret all this with a curious benign eye rather than scorn and contempt (Williams, 2004: 161).

What saves Parr from the tragic and the negative? Indeed, the irony, whereby the images reveal how reality is a construct, a box containing human essence, but at the same time highlight that the human itself escapes the container to express something deviant: the pain, the ambitions, the obscurities and light-heartedness of many. Addressing Parr's work from an aesthetic point of view rather than merely considering him a documentarist severs to unfold the richness of his approach and account for the value of his narrative abilities. Parr goes beyond the mere documentation by letting 'the viewer' suppose stories captured in the crowded scenes he amplifies by the saturated close-ups. Stories are served on a colourful plate.<sup>6</sup>

## Faces



In landscape art, a beach may be a place of suspension and eternity were to contemplate the sea. However, a beach is a tight physical space squeezed between the infinity of the horizon and the land behind it with its houses, shopping malls, train and bus stations, parking, and supermarkets. In Parr's shots, the sea is marginalised: he portrays stretches of concrete and pebbles where people meet. The beach is a stage where life happens (Fiske, 2017: 43-45; Coëffé, 2010; Lageiste, 2018).

People and their stuff are recurrent in the beach imaginary. From an iconographic point of view, objects reinforce the beach's identity as a place of signification, a well-defined area of meaning, and a mirror of the times. On the beach, everything seems naturally recursive, whatever the medium of representation (Williams, 2004: 155-162; Beyaert-Geslin, 2020; Wells, 2021, cap.1).

Bourdieu's well-known essay *Un art moyen* (1965) highlighted the role of clichés in photography. In particular, he referred to tourist photographers consecrating their middle-class view as unique while the same place is recorded under identical circumstances by thousands of other people

6. Parr is a keen collector of diverse objects. See <https://www.martinparr.com/objects> and, for example, the volumes Martin Parr, *Parr World*, vol. 1, 'Objects', New York, Aperture, 2008; and *Real Food*, London, Phaidon, 2006.

– something that especially fits the beach environment as a producer of clichés.<sup>7</sup> Clichés on the beach are reassuring and safe, creating affection and familiarity around the place even if the place is marketed and experienced as a place of transgression and freedom. A paradox whereby, in Parr's photography, the sea is distant, the beach is trash, and everything is ordinary and British (Pollen, 2018).

I believe the impressionists first collected beach clichés and rituals, and their beach paintings remained a legacy to artists who resorted to the same environment for their art. These clichés, rituals and symbolic objects can be explained in terms of social history and technique.

Though separated by the Channel, Normandy and the English coastal line share a common history of attraction and separation between the two nations. Both became, at one point, tourist attractions, mediated and reproduced by art. Historically, the windy and coldish Northern environment attracted Londoners and Parisians bourgeois alike, making the beach the testimony to a new class beyond nationalities (Smith, 2010). Be it the beach landscapes of Impressionism or Parr's photography, clichés define people as belonging to the same category of holidaymakers and privileged ones. A world apart, enclosed and suspended during the short holiday time.

Moreover, the 'instant', a moment in which light and colours modulate the surface on which artists challenge their vision and hence the interpretation of reality, is a well-known aspect of impressionist painting that was probably developed in response to the example of early photographers. Early photographers looked for the same effects to be legitimised in aesthetic terms. This points to the close relationship between beach painting and photography that existed from the beginning. Beach light represented a challenge for both past and present art forms (McNamara and Aubenas, 2010; Messina, 2010). As he described in his interviews, Parr used the palette of commercial photography and flashed the light, in particular, to define with precision every detail of the shot to the point of creating a 'plastic' world, hyperreal and hence unreal.<sup>8</sup> The augmented light and the spatial awareness he identifies as crucial aspects of aesthetics create a multidimensional effect by using colours on details that forefront meaning.<sup>9</sup> Balancing curiosity, obsession, and his collector's push to possess what he sees, Parr brings out the oddity of humans as they are

7. <https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/travel/global-tourism-martin-parr>.

8. See, Marie Gautier, Aurore Fossard, "I'm the antidote to propaganda: A conversation with Martin Parr", *La Clé des langues*, 2012 (<http://cle.ens-lyon.fr/anglais/arts/photographie/i-m-the-antidote-to-propaganda-a-conversation-with-martin-parr>); and "Reportage sur Martin Parr", *La Clé des langues*, 2012 (<http://cle.ens-lyon.fr/anglais/arts/photographie/reportage-sur-martin-parr>).

9. See <https://www.canon-europe.com/pro/stories/martin-parr-style-vision>.

busy building quirky lives. He sees the patterns that shape what we are by brightening contrast and light.

Let me describe a few examples. *The Last Resort* (1986) opens with the image of a couple facing each other in a tea room (fig. 1). The dominant colours are black, a light greenish tone and cream. The wall is decorated with a light-coloured band; a lamp above the two figures balances the composition on the top area of the photograph with a touch of colour.

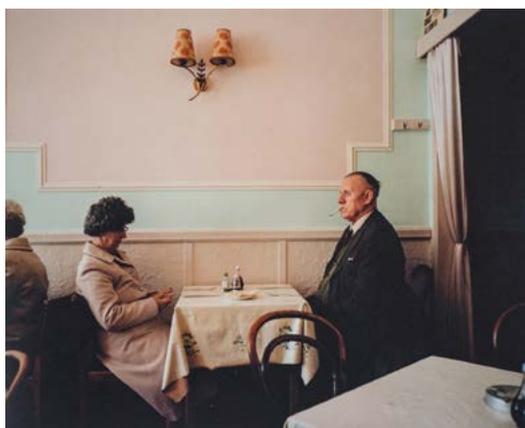


Fig. 1 : Martin Parr, *The Last Resort*, 6<sup>th</sup> printing, 2020, p. 11 (courtesy of Martin Parr and The Parr Foundation)



Fig. 2 : Édouard Manet, *Sur la plage*, 1873 (Public domain via [Wikimedia commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Manet_-_Sur_la_plage.jpg)).

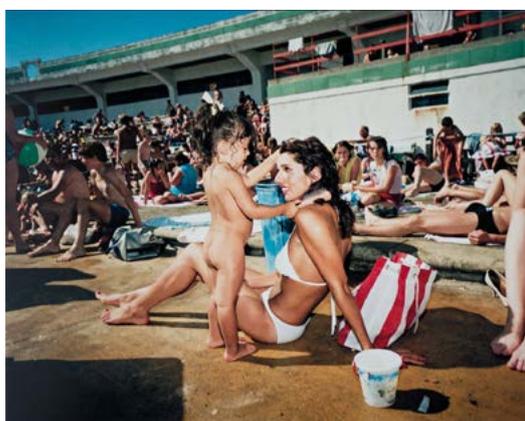


Fig. 3 : Martin Parr, *The Last Resort*, 6<sup>th</sup> printing, 2020, p. 45 (courtesy of Martin Parr and The Parr Foundation)

The woman is wearing a cream coat, looking at her nails, while the man stares outside the scene with a cigarette hanging from his lips. Bread and butter have been served. Salt, pepper, and sauce wait for the meal to be taken in. A calm, tidy, modest atmosphere surrounds the two. Concentrated or lost in their thoughts, the couple conveys a feeling of isolation, a feeling shared, for example, by the couple portrayed in the painting entitled *On the beach* by Manet (1873) (fig. 2). Both couples are absorbed by their privacy: the location invites a sensation of void and stillness provided by the horizontal line of the gaze. Their dresses and the close-up give the sense of filling. One can hardly perceive the sea and the natural environment, yet in both pictures, the contrast between the indoor/ outdoor dimension conveys the same feeling of suspension and boredom. In contrast, the women appear accustomed and accommodated. The two men look edgy as if waiting for something to happen.

An interesting instance of a *topos* in beach life representations is the combing of the hair (fig. 3). In Parr, a naked child is combing the hair of, possibly, her young mother. They sit on concrete in full light at the centre of the scene. In the background, two adolescents glower at the photographer as if surprised or annoyed. The flash and the white costume, the bag, the bucket, and the white wall in the background also increase the light so that the gesture looks more than a simple game of affection: will she look like her mother in the future?

In Degas's painting *'Beach Scene'* (1869-70), the role is reversed, and the adult woman is combing a girl relaxing on the beach. The young girl in the



Fig. 4 : Edgar Degas, *Beach Scene*, 1876-1877  
(Public domain via [Wikimedia commons](#)).

foreground has been swimming, and her nurse (?) is combing through her wet hair (fig. 4).

Along with the parasol and basket, her swim-suit is laid to dry next to her. The picture may seem almost two-dimensional, as it was probably painted indoors. The position of the characters and the umbrella form a semicircle that reminds of a hug, a self-contained position signalling intimacy. The red-

dish swimming costume on the right and the brown bag, the black skirt of the girl, contrast with the white of the other garments around it and the tiny figurines on the left. A nanny carrying a baby, a young woman with a reddish towel on her head, and two children were drying in their towels. A couple talks in the background with their dog, while others bathe in the background. A scene of peace where the beach's ochre melts into the sea's greenish hue. A scene that cannot capture the outdoors, the fresh air, the smells, and the sounds that can be imagined in Parr's scenes but forefronts the intimacy of gesture.

In the previous paragraphs, I mentioned the importance of objects captured in positions and functions that transform them into symbols. Parasols, wooden chairs, tents, and bathing machines characterise the impressionist environment and their holidaymakers. Prams appear, too,

as in fig. 5, where Eugène Boudin, for example, portrays one next to a group of women reading in a circle. The pram is a mere element of the composition that fills the group in the painting. From the focal centre of the image, i.e. a woman on her back with a large black skirt, the gaze moves to the left towards the pram's black cover and into the tent. The pram then becomes a key element in the composition where the objects dominate over people on a seemingly dusky day.



Fig. 5 : Eugène Boudin, *A Beach Scene* [?]  
(Public domain via [WikiArt](#)).

Likewise, the American painter Edward Henry Potthast (1857-1927) places the baby carriage at the heart of the painting. A young woman in the shade is reading or chatting peacefully beside the pram, surrounded by people. On the back, the sea is lighted, and the sand almost feels heavy and deep. A composition that conveys a more serene atmosphere thanks to the balance between the human and natural components (fig. 6<sup>10</sup>).

Babies and their prams are a peculiar presence on Parr's beaches. On the one hand, babies stay with their family and parents under the sun.

10. Potthast, Edward Henry, *Baby Carriage on Beach*, Vero Beach Museum of Art, Florida (<https://pixels.com/featured/baby-carriage-on-beach-edward-henry-potthast.html>).



Fig. 7 : Martin Parr, *The Last Resort*, 6<sup>th</sup> printing, 2020, p. 18 (courtesy of Martin Parr and The Parr Foundation)

On the other, they go with them to the casino, the amusement arcades, or the indoor funfair. The images are all disturbing as they render the sufferance of the baby in an uncomfortable, unfamiliar situation: the hot sun, the crowd around them, and the overstimulation of the environment. The baby or toddler entertains the adults around him/her, feeding on formula or junk food.

In fig. 7, for example, the scene is indoor: the baby is out of focus and looks like a ghostly presence evaded from the pram to play and touch with the arcade games. On the left of the picture, three distracted ladies in a row are absorbed by their game. An outdoor photograph (fig. 8) shows a stroller positioned so the vector slopes down to the baby in a sort of L-shaped pose. The reading of the picture is left-right. The picture represents three stages of life, different generations and conditions: the past, the present, and the future. The father (?) stands outside the scene, and the grandmother is just behind the mother, gazing somewhere behind the photographer with a red pacifier in her mouth. The baby's diaper is being changed while staring at the camera: but who is the baby in the scene? Only the baby seems to be aware of the photographer. All the others are caught by some other experience. They all sit on concrete; the sea is full of litter, but nobody seems to notice. It is just a place to be.



Fig. 8 : Martin Parr, *The Last Resort*, 6<sup>th</sup> printing, 2020, p. 40 (courtesy of Martin Parr and The Parr Foundation)

In Parr's picture, the ordinariness of many scenes is counterpointed by the grotesque setting: people sit on concrete steps with their feet soaking in the sea, surrounded by garbage, oddities, and machinery. Artificial items on the beach are not uncommon and can be seen in beach paintings. The example shows people diving from a wagon that seems to have been brought to the shoreline (fig. 9).



Fig. 9 : Eugène Lepoittevin, *Bains de mer à Étretat*, c. 1866 (Public domain via [Wikimedia commons](#)).

Parr's beaches are not natural. The impressionist's eye explores the natural environment where humans intrude, but nature lingers. Parr's landscape is full of the same light and colours of the en-plein air scenery, but the beach is now a human artefact. From this perspective, the famous image of

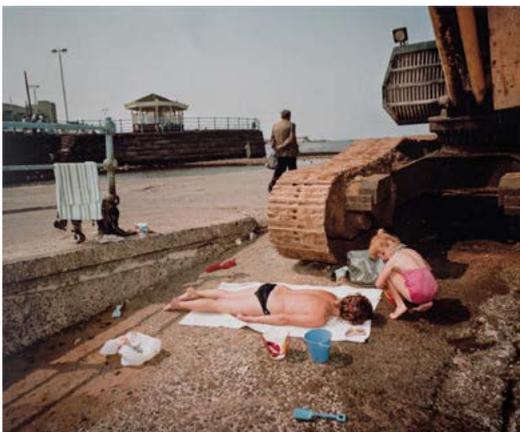


Fig. 10 : Martin Parr, *The Last Resort*, 6<sup>th</sup> printing, 2020, p. 83 (courtesy of Martin Parr and The Parr Foundation)

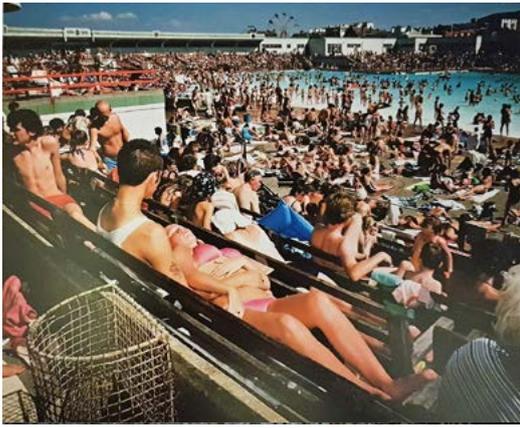


Fig. 11 : Martin Parr, *The Last Resort*, 6<sup>th</sup> printing, 2020, p. 27 (courtesy of Martin Parr and The Parr Foundation)

the child playing next to a large tank-like crawler is especially significant (fig. 10).

A low wall crosses the picture plane, splitting the visual space. The child and the mother stay on a path leading to the water on the right hand. On the left, three buckets, a spade, a pair of red jelly shoes, and a plastic bag stand out with the bath towel as if these elements had been inserted artificially into the scene. They are out of place and contrast with an older man walking by while carrying a grey bag. The hands are clasped behind the back: he belongs to the scene while the sunbathers do not.



Fig. 12 : Eugène Lepoittevin, *Les Bains de mer, Plage d'Étretat*, 1864 (Public domain via [Wikimedia commons](#)).

The fast, full-bodied strokes of colour are illuminated by an intense, robust and transparent light that makes all the elements in the composition of the painting shine and glow.



Fig. 13 : Eugène Boudin, *Beach Scene at Trouville*, 1863 (Public domain via [Wikimedia commons](#)).

On the impressionist canvas, one feels the fine grains of sand, the sound of the waves, the sun's warmth, and the breeze that lifts the clothes of the protagonists. The ocean's scent and the waves' force provide a dynamism so much needed in life. Parr's beaches, instead, are crowded (fig. 11). People troop to absorb sunlight but sit on concrete and in parking lots surrounded by rusty, abandoned structures. The garbage constantly fills the shots: food waste, leftovers, plastic containers, and all paraphernalia abandoned with no care. There is no nostalgia: reality is on full display.



Fig. 14 : Martin Parr, *The Last Resort*, 6<sup>th</sup> printing, 2020, p. 70 (courtesy of Martin Parr and The Parr Foundation)

Scattered objects are part of the beach landscape whenever bathers appear: Lepoittevin in *Bathing, Étretat Beach* (1864) and Boudin in *Scène de plage à Trouville* (fig. 12-13) portray people with their objects: chairs, children, shoes, and garments left on the beach by the little crowd lined along the shore; dogs are also present as in some of Parr's photographs (fig. 14).

The example point to the presence of recursive symbolic objects that build the beach environment. Parr's people are poles apart from the Impressionists' characters on the beach. Rather

than privileged in being bourgeois, Parr's people are unique in their oddities and what they bring around them, but the contrast highlights the persistence of a symbolic beach identity.

## What is left

The impressionists viewed the beach as a place to experiment with open-air painting. Their works also testify to the transformation of the northern coast of Normandy and the first holidays in Côte d'Azur. Rather than being loci of picturesque wilderness, villages like Trouville became seaside resorts where the Parisians could replicate their urban habits in a more relaxed meditative atmosphere. In the same way, small villages on the other side of the Channel were soon transformed by tourism. The impressionists collected the emergence of new habits that became recurrent themes nourishing the marine holiday imagination throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The trend migrated across the Atlantic too, and American painters embraced the same perspective. Impressionist beach painting disclosed a new lifestyle also handed over to photography. Photography, in turn, became the privileged testimony of the new leisure by popularising habits and clichés (Damisch, 2001: 10).

In this perspective, Parr's beach photography collects this tradition of the beach as a locus of transition from one state to another: a place to experience the body and some nakedness, a place overloaded with expectations: fun, sex, freedom, or boredom, rest and family amusement. The continuous presence of symbolic objects testifies to the beach as a myth-maker worldwide.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of Britain, the beach established itself as a place apart for the middle and working classes, where basic needs such as eating, resting and socialising could be satisfied in multiple ways, different from the ordinary: not personal but shared. The exceptionality of the setting was needed as much as the comfort of the habits. Socialised leisure was the key to life, whether a day trip or a holiday.

People also brought on the beach their urban dimension. They did not look for Nature or the sea: the beach, as Parr well demonstrates, was an appendix of town and city life. A paradox that emerged in the 1980s, when the clash between tradition and modernity was emerging in British society. The rituality of the beach lifestyle preserved the quintessential *topoi* of Britishness while letting out social change with a disruptive force:

11. Parr has shot beaches all over the world. See <https://www.magnumphotos.com/theory-and-practice/martin-parr-beach-therapy>.

this paradox is the core of Parr's view. In his shots, humans themselves are symbolic elements, hence the preference for close-ups or the presence of architectural items that cut lines into the scene that compel the viewer to fill in the missing points and create his/ her mental fillers and narratives. The beach is often away from what the looker sees. The shore is crushed, and the light irradiates throughout, turning litter into gold. The importance of the spatial arrangement surrounding people on the beach testifies to the shift from the dominance of the natural environment to the artificial one. Beaches turned from wild places into places of comfort, i.e. urban places with a touch of Nature. It started when the bourgeois of the impressionists settled on the Northern coast and reached the apex of this anthropic transformation in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, before the progressive take over of a green consciousness as the new trend in consumerism that we are still experiencing. In this perspective, Britain was the country that first met the change.<sup>12</sup>

Images, especially photographic images, from the moment they are reproduced, multiplied, and transmitted, establish a norm of perception: 'the world's "photographability" has become the condition under which it is constituted and perceived' (Cadava, 1997: xxviii). In this perspective, landscapes seduce amateur photographs. The sight of an image, whatever the vehicle (advertisement, postcard, or social media), persuades the viewer to visit the place. Every time the place is visited, another picture is generated due to a personal experience. In time, the place will be turned into a new source of experience and a new spring of images, while more pictures will be collected, either mental or real. This mechanism also fixed the beach imaginary (Hagarty, 1986: 9-10).

Parr's photography is recursive and cyclical in representing beaches as he draws on his experience, yet it is new as Parr can spot the novelty. We change, society changes and people change: on the beach, the recursive presence of mythologies, though, acts as the cohesive devices of the narrative.

In his long career, Parr has been able to grasp the turning points of change in British social history both in terms of technique and scenario: the beaches witnessed the arrival of immigrant families, a blend of the young and the elderly, eccentrics and ordinary people. Parr reproduced everyday mythologies with a pop-art approach in which the ordinary

12. Henry Lefebvre observing the survival of capitalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century foresaw the political role of landscape (Elden, 2007). In his perspective, the leisure dimension of the beach is the escape from the constraint of class and social divisions typical of urban life. A place to relax is a place to drop constraints. Even when the beach absorbs the oddity of modern life, it is constantly recast as a place of freedom. The concrete merging in the sand and the sand pouring in the sea are scenarios where the natural and the artificial melt into one: humans face their contradictions as they manipulate nature while desperately seeking it.

turns into eccentricity and becomes familiar and attractive. The elderly and the children queue impatiently for ice cream and chips, babies drink cans of Coke and men and women lounge around amongst the littered debris of contemporary life. They all display what they are, being ‘compelled’ to have fun. They create a carnivalesque visual mesh of sense and nonsense. Social relations, fundamental abstractions, will always exist in and through liminal spaces, but Parr turns them into art.

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