

COLD CASE NO. 3. POST- PHOTOGRAPHIC MELANCHOLIA: NATIONALISM AND IDENTITY

It is indeed a different nature that speaks to the camera from the one which addresses the eye; different above all in the sense that instead of a space worked through by a human consciousness there appears one which is affected unconsciously.

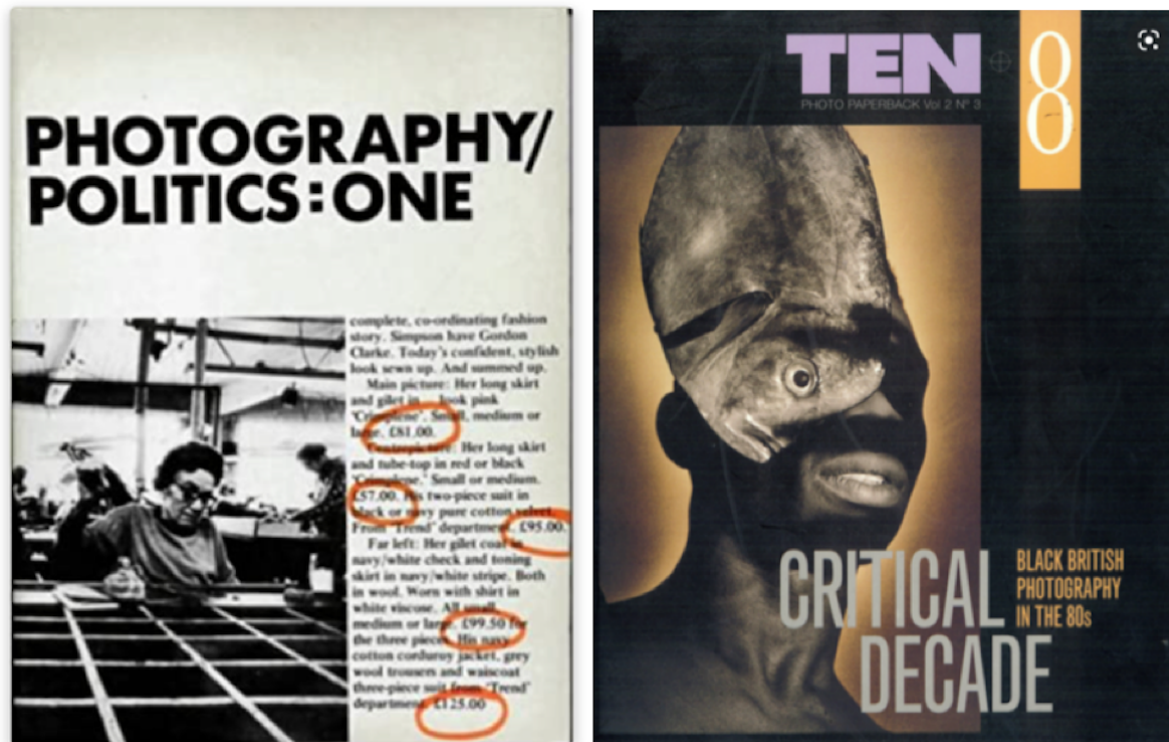
– Walter Benjamin, ‘A Short History of Photography’ (1931)

This is the last in this series of cold cases for *Still Searching...* My overall aim has been to animate readers to argue and debate the polemic of [Forget Photography](#). Forgetting photography is a thought experiment and a critique of photographic theory and culture. Forgetting is a strategy enabling a view of photography from a future present. Photography is no longer continuous with the mode of image production and circulation; rather, it is finally a historical medium of heritage. Two serious issues arise from the discontinuity of photography and the current technical image. Firstly, the computational networked image is still promoted in terms of the language and conventions of photography, which only masks the new networked condition of the image. Secondly, and paradoxically, in computational culture photography proliferates as the dominant language of the representational real. Several important questions and new research agendas arise from this situation. What can photographic collections and archives tell us about the extended apparatus of the medium, now that the historical period of the mechanical analogue has passed? In what ways does photography in its corporeal and cultural disguises persist? Where can post-photographic scholarship go next?

Photography/Politics

Over the last decade photographic scholarship has undergone revision from several related critical positions. This has paid dividends in a growing interest in the socio-psycho-techno-politico nature of historical photography, although such perspectives are applied rather less evidently in what is still regarded as contemporary photography. The digitisation of analogue photographs has clearly contributed to collections and archives being made available to a new generation of scholars. Indeed, the greater scale and circulation of online images is a factor in our increased attention to what images are doing. We might consider recent photographic scholarship as a re-inscription of a sharper end of politics, motivated by resistance to the re-emergence of right-wing nationalism, authoritarian governments and a groundswell of calls to

decolonise cultural institutions, as well as an evident turn towards planetary sustainability. For photography, critical histories cut against the grain of the consecrated canon, its purified modernist aesthetics and settled social histories.



Left: Cover of *Photography/Politics: One*, ed. Jo Spence and Terry Dennett (London: Photography Workshop, 1979). / Right: Cover of *Critical Decade: Black British Photography in the 1980s* (Birmingham: Ten.8, 1992).

Rewriting, or re-visioning, photography's place in the world requires not only an investigation of the discursive traces and order of the past to write a history of the present, but also an examination of those things without a history, which largely surround oppression and what is repressed. ¹ Tracing, or at least here identifying, a genealogy of colonialism and its postcolonial imbrication in photography is one of the tasks for remembering photography. From the perspective of *Forget Photography*, viewing photographic history from a postcolonial perspective marks the beginning of the process of forgetting photography in order to remember it differently.

Cold Case No. 3

In this case I briefly outline a possible approach to understanding the zombie state of British photography as a specific affect of postcolonial melancholia, a cultural condition of mourning without recognition of what has been lost. In *Mourning and Melancholia* Sigmund Freud defines melancholy and mourning as two different responses to loss. ² Unlike the process of conscious mourning, which finally reconciles loss, melancholy is a pathology of the unconscious in which separation from an object of attachment remains incomplete. Instead of being able to redirect desire to other objects of affection, the melancholic directs the excess of desire inward towards an identification with what has been lost, creating an unrecognised inner division and unresolved conflict. The possibility of a post-photographic melancholia briefly sketched here draws upon the idea of the unconscious, not in Freud's sense of an individual pathology, but in its cultural connotations. Post-photographic melancholia is a

variation on Paul Gilroy's expansion of the idea of postcolonial melancholia, which provided new insights into British nationalism and racism. ³ In *Postcolonial Melancholia* Gilroy adapts Freud's psychoanalytic definition as the loss of an imagined omnipotence and 'an unhealthy and destructive postimperial hungering for renewed greatness.' ⁴ In thinking about the possibility of a post-photographic melancholia, I am also intrigued by the potential need to rethink Walter Benjamin's idea of the 'optical unconscious' from the perspective of *Forget Photography*. ⁵ For psychoanalysis, Benjamin's term stressed the optical nature of the unconscious in which images appear. For photography, the optical captures details unnoticed by the human eye, which appeal to the unconscious. Here there is a question of whether Benjamin's brief thoughts about the optical unconscious might be historically tied to the mechanical analogue and might therefore represent an equation of a different kind with the advent of the programmable image. I also think it would be worth weighing up whether the idea of a computational unconscious might connect with Frederic Jameson's idea of the 'political unconscious'. ⁶ Alternatively resurrecting the unconscious to help illuminate human cognition in the technological and post-Anthropocene world might be less useful than Katherine Hayles's investigations into 'nonconscious cognition', ⁷ or Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's view of our relationship to media as one of 'habituation', ⁸ where our bodies become archives of streaming, updating, sharing and saving. These are ideas which, for the purposes of this blog series, will have to be set aside for future investigations. I am aware, as ever, that the idea of post-photographic melancholia prescribes a large arc of possibilities and, like the ruined territory of photography, remains for the most part uncharted. Cold Case No. 3 can only gesture towards an untested hypothesis and is contained in a discussion of photography's relationship to postcolonial melancholia. Ultimately the investigation into post-photographic melancholia is not so much forward-thinking as another means of forgetting photography.

Post-photographic Melancholia in Britain

Post-photographic melancholia in Britain involves both the loss of Britain's once powerful empire and the loss of photography's historic role in defining that reality through its representation of British identity. In practical terms, post-photographic melancholia is a collective behaviour of imagined identity, performed through a triad of apparatus, photographer and subject.



Martin Parr photographing the current owner of the house he grew up in. [Screenshot from YouTube](#) taken by the author from *Imagine: The World According to Parr*, BBC, 03.12.2003

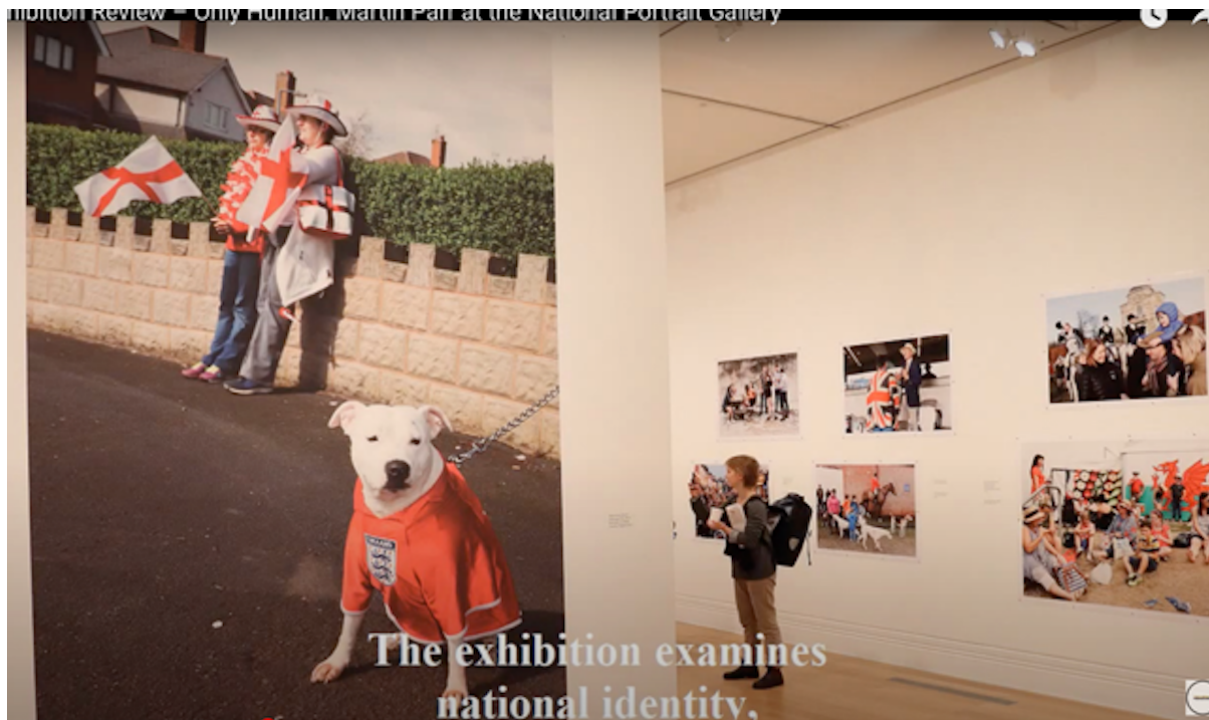
What is being suggested here is that in post-photographic melancholia the coupling of apparatus/photographer/subject produces an image – and its reception – that is unable to work through either the loss of empire or the loss of the medium, and can ultimately let go of neither. In the performance of the photographic unconscious the larger assemblage of apparatus/photographer/camera/subject/image/circulation/reception/archive is locked together in a cycle of ritual identity, whose origin lies beyond reach or comprehension. Locally, the performance of post-photographic melancholia repeats the myth of Britishness and its vexed sublime Englishness.

I cite the work of Martin Parr here as an obvious example of the condition, but it is British documentary photography of the second half of the twentieth century which bears the hallmarks of melancholia. This is not only because of the economic decline of Britain over that period, but essentially because of the eventual transformation of photography with the advent of the networked image. Martin Parr's case is an apt way of demonstrating post-photographic melancholia precisely because, in a light-hearted nod to psychoanalysis, he publicly announces himself as a middle-class subject and [describes his work](#) as a therapy for his love/hate relationship with Britain. However, I am at pains to point out that post-photographic melancholia is not investigated here as an individual condition but as a class cultural phenomenon. I do not wish to pathologise Martin Parr nor analyse his images in psychoanalytic terms, although it is quite possible. Rather, it is to see Parr's highly successful photographic career as evidence of what I take to be a post-photographic melancholic assemblage, which involves not only photographers but also a network of national institutional arrangements, whose known as well as unknown purpose is to reproduce national narratives. This is why Parr's prodigious output and self-promotion, as well as his subject matter, reputation and critical reception demonstrate post-photographic melancholia so well.

Over a long career Parr has appeared on BBC's *The Late Show* (1989) and *Imagine: The World According to Parr* (2003), as well as making a documentary for the BBC, *Think of England* (1999). Parr's work is well represented by the British Council and Arts Council Collections. In 2017 Parr established the [Martin Parr Foundation](#) in Bristol as a home for British photography. On *The Late Show* [Parr defended](#) his important watershed project *The Last Resort* (1983–86), ⁹ which depicted working class people holidaying in New Brighton, a resort on the mouth of the River Mersey opposite Liverpool, by arguing that 'all photographers use their subjects – the end justifies the means'. But Parr – more instructively for the condition of post-photographic melancholia – [subsequently adds](#), 'And I had succeeded in highlighting wider issues, like how the fabric of the nation is breaking down.' Britain in 1989 had already endured a decade of Margaret Thatcher's conservative government, dismantling post-war social democracy and the welfare state in an outright attack on working-class people. The British economy was being restructured by global neoliberalism, and traditional working-class communities in the industrial north of England were being irrevocably damaged. Yet Parr evokes the fabric of 'the nation being torn apart', rather than society or community, because the nation is the primary object of his photographic gaze. Britain still has a reactionary right-wing party in government, whose views have changed little since the Thatcher years.

In 2016, looking back on his work in a *Tate Shots* video, [Parr expresses](#) the impossibility of representing a nation, saying, 'What I'm trying to do is...just show things as I find them

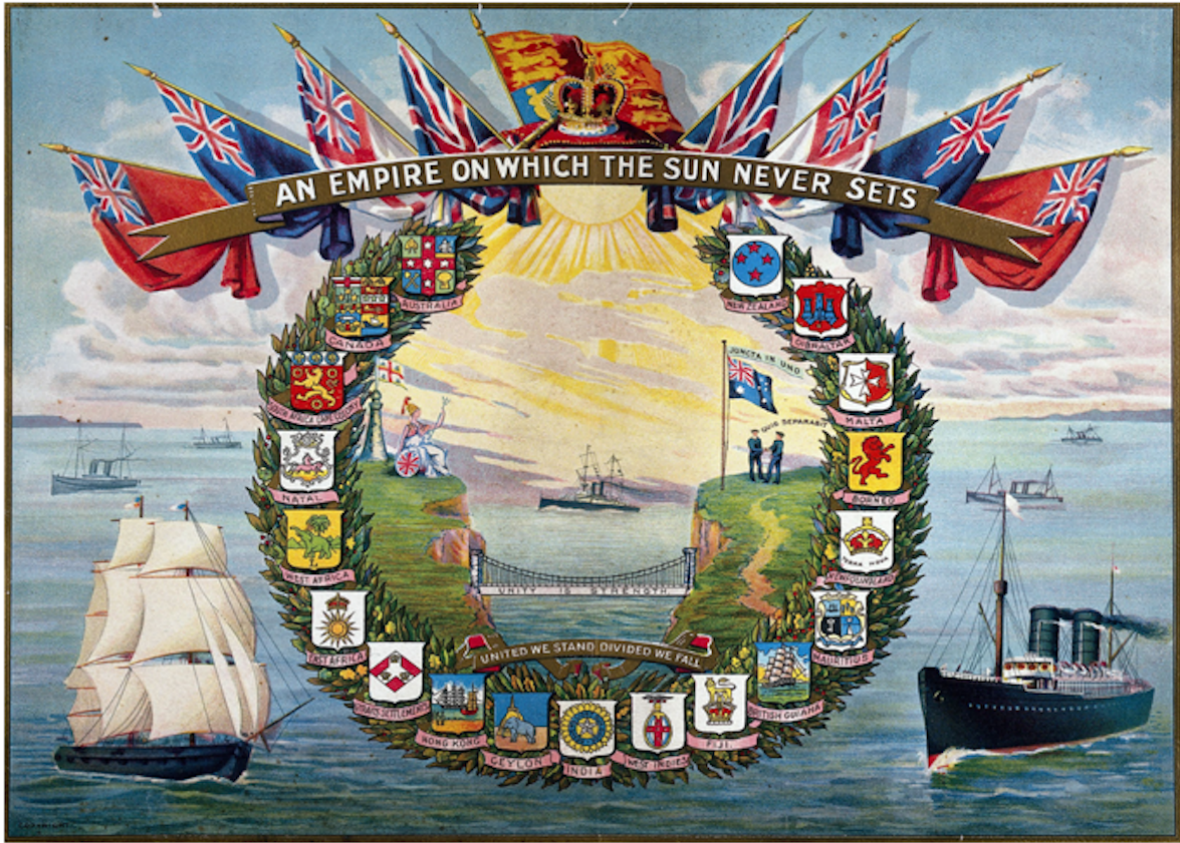
and...show things as I think they are, rather than how people expect them to be.' Operating in the space between how Parr finds things and what he thinks they are, his work has largely been taken by liberal journalism as satirical comment and irony, evidence itself of the British character, of 'not taking things too seriously' and being able to laugh at ourselves and others. But from the perspective of post-photographic melancholia there is more than wit and irony in the photographic gaze of nation and identity that Parr mobilises.



[Screenshot from YouTube](#) taken by the author from *Only Human: Martin Parr at the National Portrait Gallery*, 06.03.2019

Parr [describes his approach](#) in the following terms: 'With photography, I like to create fiction out of reality. I try and do this by taking society's natural prejudice and giving it a twist.' But from a post-photographic perspective Parr is creating not fiction out of reality, but rather a reality out of fiction: the fiction, the imaginary of Britain's once great empire; the reality, contemporary postcolonial melancholia and with it, photography as heritage, expressing the twin senses of unfathomable loss and mourning. The 'natural prejudice' Parr 'twists' has a deeper logic, as Paul Gilroy describes in his reflections on the contradictions of the English self-image over the period of Parr's Britishness projects. Gilroy argues that Thatcherism and its inheritors provided a 'peculiar psycho-social transposition' of race, which is 'integral to their successes and has intensified since'. ¹⁰ In effect, Gilroy suggests that contrary to history and appearances, the English, as white indigenous inhabitants of Britain, consider themselves to be an unjustly treated minority in their own country.

Earth, Nation and Identity



[Cover of a seamen's hospital booklet](#), early 1900s, displaying the crests of British colonies and emblazoned with the phrase 'An Empire on Which the Sun Never Sets'



Google's stake in SpaceX ownership. [SpaceNews illustration](#)

As a class cultural phenomenon, post-photographic melancholia has several prerequisites. It requires, firstly, that photographic images be publicly exhibited and endorsed by national institutions; secondly, that the subject matter of the images be consensually understood to display national characteristics, habits and traits; and thirdly, that the medium of photography

be accepted as documenting reality. As an assemblage, this produces the melancholic gaze of a nation, a seamless narrative and an ingrained naturalised mode in which individuals are invited to see themselves reflected. However, the problem this raises is precisely the question of who is inviting this gaze, and whether all British subjects and passport holders can see themselves reflected by it – which, clearly, they can't. Post-photographic melancholia operates as a conflicted racialised discourse of whiteness, but in the peculiar context in which representations of whiteness, mediated by white people, remain largely unremarked upon, unlike the representation of Blackness. The recent republication of Richard Dyer's analysis of the construction of whiteness, twenty years after its original publication in 1997, is an indication of renewed interest in racialised discourse and how whiteness in Britain remains an unexamined category. ¹¹ Whiteness is unremarked upon because it is taken by white people as a given identity, forged by slavery, empire and science, against which all others are measured. Since the Civil Rights movement, critical race theory in the US has also articulated the historical ascendancy of white suprematism through the slave trade and colonialism as the basis of all racism.

Post-photographic melancholia is confined by its unconscious condition to repeating loss in the quest for white national identity, whilst marginalising and stereotyping everyone who is classified as non-white. This is a continuation of the colonial lens of photography, now turned back upon itself and the photographer in an internalised and misplaced gaze. Post-photographic melancholia defines a much wider and longer image agenda, focused upon and limited to the photographic subject. From the archival gaze of individually photographed slaves to the selfie, photography repeats a politics of (racial) identity rather than a politics of emancipation. Notwithstanding, Shawn Michelle Smith and Sharon Sliwinski point out that 'postcolonial scholars have subsequently demonstrated that photography also allows for slippages and resistances, forms of double mimesis, disidentification, and double consciousness that resist official, normative strategies of categorization and containment'. ¹² Thus, there has always been a resistant gaze in photographic representation, albeit one after the fact.



Screenshot from YouTube taken by the author from *Only Human: Martin Parr at the National Portrait Gallery*, 06.03.2019

Resisting post-photographic melancholia has a parallel in a radical tradition of Black and feminist politics, but one in which identity remains umbilically tied to the constrained and disciplined subject of representation, which ultimately individuates rather than collectivises. In a culture of hyper-individualism, mobilising critical and oppositional practices based on identity is more likely than not to be assimilated by corporatised versions of multicultural heritage. Identity representation might be an impasse for emancipatory practice, held hostage to a representational reality in a percentage game by advertising imagery. As I have argued with post-photographic melancholia, photographic representation reproduces a normative reality from a fiction, making it more difficult to progress radical democratic organisation and develop new image practices. As Gilroy says of postcolonial melancholia, ‘the festering social wounds which derive from the collective refusal to mourn or properly to acknowledge the colonial and imperial past, now corrode the life of various European polities... Melancholia means being stuck with figurations of the past that are both distorted and comforting... The unsettling past is held on to, cultivated, nurtured in a neurotic, pathological way.’ 13

As Gilroy also says, ‘Political nationalism has long been recognized as requiring systematic forgetting.’ 14