Exhibition Review: **Strange and Familiar: Britain as Revealed by International Photographers, Curated by Martin Parr, Barbican Centre, London, 16 March 2016 – 19 June 2016**

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Somewhat appropriately, the first two photographers whose work we encounter in the Barbican’s recent Strange and Familiar exhibition were quoted with sentiments that summed up the immense exhibition to follow. Edith Tudor Hart, whose images of working class life in London’s East End in the 1930s were the first works on display, remarked that

in the hands of the person who uses it with feeling and imagination, the camera becomes […] a vital factor in recording and influencing the life of the people and in promoting human understanding.

In the very next room, a sentence plucked from Henri Cartier Bresson’s The Decisive Moment (2014) stated that ‘a single picture becomes a story in itself’. These quotes distil classic arguments on what documentary photography offers – a meaningful glance into the lives of others, and a brief narrative of identity, of time and place – and also frame an exhibit that brings 90-odd years of British life into intimate proximity. This exhibition records glimpses of the people and places of Great Britain throughout the twentieth century, depicting both the ordinary and the extraordinary in daily life and also subtly recording the changes that took place during this time: the exhibit begins with film prints of women wearing nylons and girdles and ends with a slideshow projection of people shot on the street in Birmingham wearing tracksuits and Zara.

As well as telling visual stories of these times, this exhibition displays the poetic styles and perspectives of these 23 photographers from elsewhere.

The diversity of experience and emotion that their cameras found suggests a romance and devastation in the recognizable that really is, as it says in the title, strange and familiar. Indeed, it is difficult to look at the images in this exhibition without romanticizing the idea of Britain past: the forbearance of Cartier Bresson’s man grimly enduring the driving rain at Ascot with a news- paper on his head, or the British quirk and love of tea as memorialized by the four people crammed into a Morris Minor, napkins spread on laps, tea being poured from thermoses into teacups in American photographer Bruce Davidson’s Teatime in the Car.

It is also hard not look for traces of contemporary Britain taking shape through the Britain depicted here. On the eve of the Brexit referendum, where tensions over immigration have had devastating consequences, I noticed that the majority of the faces visible in the images here, whether on the streets of Belfast or in the countryside of the Outer Hebrides, were white. A few people of colour appear throughout the exhibition – a Sikh man in tweed in Parliament Square in the early 1960s, a couple of elegant black students in billowing gowns milling on the streets of Oxford – but these are in the minority. Perhaps this is due to the kinds of British culture the featured photographers were looking for, or to curator Martin Parr’s selecting hand, but it represents a missed opportunity to make visible the diverse experiences of Britishness being lived during the twentieth century. What we are left with is the Britain an Anglophile dreams of: the iconic Britain of bowler hats striding down misty London streets, of double decker buses and chilled bottles of milk on the doorstep. Distilled in black and white ink, these representations take on mythic proportions.

Likewise, the poverty we encounter in Edith Tudor Hart’s exquisite work shot in the East End is picturesque in its bleakness. An image of a coddled bulldog being groomed in a parlour is hung next to a portrait of a family looking up through the roof of their bombed-out home, white washing (or are they sheets dividing the squat into rooms?) hung on thin lines above their hollow, upturned faces. But it would be a mistake to see these images as simply a record of a time that is thankfully past – like the best histories, these photographs depict how the patterns of the past structure the contemporary moment, or rise up as its mirror-twin. Poverty and extreme wealth still live uneasily cheek-by-jowl in London, and Tudor Hart’s photograph of a pale- faced child staring with resignation at the buns in a bakery window is not worlds away from the fury unleashed by the crowd who, late last year, threw bricks through the window of Brick Lane’s Cereal Killer cafe in protest against the encroachment of gentrification. In calling attention to these tensions – and, indeed, many others – Strange and Familiar offered an opportunity to reflect on a vanished time and to consider what remains.

**Reference**

Cartier Bresson, H. and Chéroux, C. (2014), The Decisive Moment: photography by Henri Cartier Bresson, Göttingen: Steidl.