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The industrial/post-industrial as unreliable indicator of the northern landscape

“The north is both our glory and our problem. It is the land that gave birth to all the clichés – dark, grim, cobbled and the rest of it-because in its heyday they were true. No part of England has had a stronger character, and you do not part with that sort of reputation easily”

Extract from: True North, Martin Wainwright.

Introduction

In this paper I will attempt to argue that the sense of English ‘Northernness’ as portrayed over many decades is essentially a constructed identity, has been largely brought about by artists, writers and photographers, by perpetuating the images of a post-industrial landscape populated by salt of the earth, flat cap wearing working classes. This vision re-inforces a stereotypical view of the North that has continued since the Industrial Revolution, whilst largely ignoring any sense of the true North as being a vast rural expanse geographically located beyond the major conurbations.

Chapter one. The clichés continue.

I was brought up in a medium sized industrial town in the North of England. Within a short distance of my home were numerous large cotton mills; at lunch time I would hear the claxon sound from said factories calling the workforce back after dinner (lunch had yet to be invented for the working classes, therefore the mid-day meal was dinner and the evening meal was tea). As I grew older, into my early teens I would explore this landscape of factories and blasted landscapes and often would fish in man-made ponds whose entire surface would be covered in cotton bobbins and anything living within the waters was usually stunted and diseased.

Throughout this period, I had never made the connection between art (that was my passion alongside fishing) and such locations, so instead I would paint landscapes of hills, trees and rivers, usually copied directly from post-cards of exotic far-away locations. It was only on becoming an art student that I began to pay attention to what was in front of me – an industrial palace of wonders shaped by a history of manufacture and mechanisation.

This awakening was a slow process and was undoubtedly influenced (though on a subconscious level) by the Principal of the art college I attended (Bolton College of Art and Design) who, whilst bearing a striking resemblance to Toulouse Lautrec, (so much so it became his nick name amongst

the students) found the subject matter for his paintings and prints in the factories and streets of the town. Unbeknown to me at the time, Roger Hampson (said Principals name) was a major figure in the Northern School of Painting (other members of this group include Trevor Grimshaw, Julian Trevelyan and L.S. Lowry) whose main preoccupations seemed to be to capture the grittiness of life in the industrial northern towns. (Or it could be argued to perpetuate or, perhaps, create the stereotypical view of the North as still perceived by many to this day)

As a photographer, looking at his work today, I am struck by the photographic-ness of his vision with many of his paintings capturing a fleeting gesture or play of light on a building; so much so that it is interesting to compare his painting with photographs I produced many years later. How much of this is unconscious inspiration I am uncertain.

Fig 1. Roger Hampson. Falcon Mill

Fig 2. John Darwell. Falcon Mill 2009.

Fig 3. Roger Hampson. Allotments.

Fig 4. John Darwell. Allotments. 2012

Comparing these works, I am quite struck by the similarity of composition/subject matter and can only assume this influence had been with me since attending the art college in the mid-1970s.

Could it be said that these images (and particularly Lowry's due to the wide recognition of his paintings) all communicate a particular sensibility that can be described as Northern-ness? If so, what shapes 'Northern Imagery'? Can it really be the 'it's grim up north' sense of post-industrial pollution and decay, hard-worn faces and rows of terraces? I would certainly say this archetype of Northern-ness was perpetuated (created maybe?) in the work of Mass Observation and in particular of Humphrey Spender's 'Worktown' (1937/8) photographs. This work, now in the collection of Bolton Council, was produced in and around the streets of Bolton and fits very much into the ethos of mills and the toiling workforce, back streets, scrubbing front steps and all the elements we have come to associate with life in the dark and industrial north.

Figs 5 & 6 Humphrey Spender Worktown images.

Knowing Bolton as I do, I feel that this portrait of the town is only focussing on the typical grim Northern archetype, falling short of reflecting the industrial heritage and how it sits in a social and geographical context. Bolton is surrounded by vast tracts of moorland and open country, yet there are no (as far as I'm aware) images of these outlying areas, or the people who occupied these spaces.

Why is this? This could be a contentious statement but my view is that depicting the landscape *per se* is, in many instances, not what the 'serious' photographer wants to get their teeth into, and if they do it is only used as a counterpoint to the industrial blight that their attention is primarily drawn to. I say this as I recognise this within my own historical practice.

I would argue this situation has continued up to the present day within photography, (for it is photography with which I am primarily concerned) like the major shows under the banner 'The North' that are on show this year. One of the major figures showing in several exhibitions on the subject is Chris Killip. Two galleries in Newcastle are featuring his much-acclaimed work under the North heading, plus further group shows in China and Liverpool. Though Killip has produced work

within the rural, notably: Isle of Man: A Portrait of the Manx, I would hazard a guess it is not this work that is being featured, but rather work from his highly acclaimed series 'In Flagrate' that concentrates on a post-industrial, almost apocalyptic landscape populated by care worn individuals struggling to get through the day. Although highly relevant at the time (the mid 1980's) by highlighting this work today, are curators still perpetuating that singular image of the North?

This vision of the North was undoubtedly fuelled by the Conservative Government of the day (headed by Margaret Thatcher) who seemed to be single minded in their determination to dismantle any sense of heavy industry and community that was surviving in the Northern cities. I was one amongst many photographers who responded to this situation by highlighting the iniquities and wholesale destruction of long-standing ways of life we saw around us on a daily basis as in the following images.

Fig 7. John Darwell. From series 'The Big Ditch' Manchester 1984

Fig 8. John Darwell. From 'Regeneration' Sheffield 1991

Unfortunately, I would argue this vision of the north is one that now permeates the sensibilities of many and perpetuates a view of northern cities as still undergoing the death throes of what Thatcher started. Along with this we have a current Conservative government who throw phrases such as 'Northern Powerhouse' with a degree of abandon without ever fully understanding how for many (London centrics?) the North is perceived under the shadow of a grim Victorian industrial legacy. With this grim post-industrial vision goes a misplaced generalisation of the 'poor Northerner' feeding into a belittling view of the North as being, somehow, culturally and financially inferior. In the (perceived?) absence of industry prosperity, and consequently culture, a patronising view of the

typical Northerner emerges as usually overweight, ill-educated and unemployed (if not actually benefit scroungers!).

Chapter two. A different perspective

“As anyone who has visited any of the five northern national parks can testify, the countryside between the river Trent and the Scottish border can be as gentle and pretty as anywhere the sweet Thames runs softly. But travellers are left with a much stronger impression of larger, grander vistas: the sweep of Pennine moors, the beetling cliffs at St Bees and Flamborough and the majestic summits of Lakeland. They are what the excitable romantic travellers of the 17th century called ‘aweful’, ‘terrible’ and ‘horride’ and what the rather kinder experts in art history today know as the Sublime”

From: True North, Martin Wainwright

At this point I guess I’d like to raise the question why? Why are we as photographers drawn to such scenarios as described in the previous chapter, whilst in many cases choosing to ignore the natural beauty of the surrounding landscape. The reasons for this appear to be, to me at least, quite complex.

Is this also about the long-standing suspicion amongst many of us that a beautiful image of a landscape is essentially vacuous and containing little merit? A quick Google search for images of the Lake District will reveal an almost limitless array of beautiful, sun kissed Lakeland fells and lakes, unfortunately very few of which fit into any idea of the Sublime, instead perpetuating a chocolate box sensibility of a benign and tended landscape. Yet, arguably, telling us nothing about the history of this (cultured) landscape and the reality of people’s lives in this region.

Or is it that many of such practitioners come from the metropolitan areas, and therefore relate to the happenings in such areas with a greater clarity and conviction? Whereas the countryside as a subject remains opaque to most urban photographers whose response to the landscape is the production of beautiful but banal images, without any political or social dimension.

This omission of ‘other’ non-industrial and more politically complex visions of the North beyond the clichés lead to a peculiar geographical understanding of the North of England. Northern England as described previously, essentially ends in the West at Preston and in the East at Newcastle. Heading northward from either point we have many miles of Northern England that completely belies the stereotypical view, portrayed earlier in this text.

This geographical region is largely unrepresented, and therefore often invisible, in terms of serious photography projects aiming to get under the surface of their subject. We see, and therefore think we understand, an awful lot about the topography and inhabitants of our cities whilst remaining largely oblivious to the structures and people who operate within the rural economy. Instead we are presented with a never-ending parade of glorious images of lakes, mountains and pristine beaches, usually photographed in beautiful glowing light.

So, this is the dilemma, maybe. This view of the North falls into its own cliché as easily as the flat caps, whippets, mills and cobblestones perspective of a hundred miles south. This is undoubtedly a complex area for discussion and there are a myriad of reasons for this scenario to have developed. However, the invisibility of and disinterest in alternative views of the North of England is upheld, as I suspect that falling into the beauty trap will do little to further the serious photographer's profile as the galleries that shape careers are also largely based within the major cities.

As a recent resident within the rural countryside of Northern England I am very much aware of this tension, of the need (desire?) to produce socially relevant work whilst being surrounded by beautiful views on every side. And within this is the added complexity of being perceived as an outsider commenting on ways of life I don't fully understand.

In 2001 the Foot and Mouth epidemic hit Cumbria and devastated the farming economy and the social structure of the region. For me as a photographer who was (is?) reticent to explore countryside issues, and depictions of the landscape, this situation presented me with a clear opportunity to engage with the communities and those worst affected to make a statement about their plight and attempts to eradicate the disease. Moreover, I wanted to point the finger at a government (this time a Labour government under Tony Blair) who seemed incapable of understanding the effect their policies on the population of the region as they were stumbling ill thought through attempts at control. In many ways and with the benefit of hindsight, this period allowed me to engage with a community caught up in events beyond their control and facing potential ruin in much the same way my earlier work had done with dock workers in Liverpool and steelworkers in Sheffield!

During the epidemic I spent every day photographing its effect on the agricultural community (and beyond) and environment of Cumbria. This work became a major book and exhibition, yet, I well remember a discussion with a curator from one of the UK's major galleries about the work and my experiences who declared: "But John, it's just a countryside issue". One of the most devastating events to occur in the UK post WWII was dismissed as a local irrelevance. Thankfully not everyone had such a myopic perspective and my work, and that of a small number of other likeminded photographers such as Chris Chapman and Nick May, and it did reach a wide global audience.

I present two examples of images produced within the same location that perhaps exemplify this difference of intent.

Fig 9. Hadrian's Wall. Photographer unknown

Fig 10. John Darwell.

German Tourists posing by 'Countryside closed' sign, Hadrian's Wall.2001

Fig 9 is an image of Hadrian's Wall (for the purposes of this discussion the northern edge of England and a World Heritage Site set within an area of 'Outstanding Natural Beauty') that exemplifies this sense of the stylised, romanticised, landscape (the beauty trap) whilst Fig 10 is also of Hadrian's Wall (by myself as part of the Foot and Mouth 'Dark Days series). Yet, this image does not simply show a pleasing landscape apparently independent from social and political context. Instead, it thematises natural beauty by showing the tourists' attraction to the beautiful landscape, creating for themselves a snapshot of it whilst being oblivious to a sign declaring the area to be closed due to Foot and Mouth, (or perhaps because the sign was there?). Here we see two images of the same region yet each bearing a very different sensibility. There is much more to be said about these Northern regions.

I think the point is that the rural (not only in the North, but in general) must shout to be heard, in the context of the art world, and is largely invisible to curators who are far more interested in events that shape our cities and conurbations.

So, within the context of the imagery of the North we have a huge swathe of land that, within the confines of English boundaries, could be regarded as the true (far?) north as opposed to the stereotypical depictions of The North we have become accustomed to.

This being the case, there is a large, thinly spread population (as is the nature of the countryside), whose lives are hugely underrepresented when it comes to contemporary photography.

Of course, there are always exceptions to this as in James Ravilious and later Chris Chapman's, work in rural Devon or Fay Godwin's 'Democratic Republic of Shepherds' project set in the valleys of the Lake District demonstrates. Overall the depictions of Northern England's rural life have tended, as with the land itself, to be sanitised by depictions of homely cottages and smiling locals (often with sheepdog in tow) and bear little resemblance to the actuality of their daily lives. A walk around any book shop will quickly reveal a whole tranche of publication celebrating Wainwright's Cumbria, or James Herriot's Yorkshire with new variations of such publications increasing on what seems a weekly basis.

What these publications do is tap into a vision of the countryside (I choose this word carefully) that is both idealised and unrealistic, one that taps into a world of nostalgia for something the viewer had no experience of or that frankly ever existed! (I see similarities with Brexit here!) a world of wild flower meadows, smiling locals and horse drawn ploughs where the sun always shines.

A slightly different, but also limited view of the landscape is that of a cosmopolitan grouping who view the countryside as a playground (often second home owners who do little to support the local economy) to be reimagined for this purpose alone. Arguably, these visions are often wilfully ignoring, any sense of its realities in terms of economic structures and challenges such as housing shortages, mental health and drug related issues, petty crime and many other such problems that the city dweller had hoped to avoid once the conurbation had been left behind, if only for a short while.

This blinkered viewpoint is slowly changing through the writings of Robert Macfarlane and James Rebanks amongst others. Interestingly though, this sensibility does not yet seem to have reached the realm of photography. If you google 'James Rebanks' you will be presented with the usual clichés of a smiling farmer with lambs and sheepdog in very much the 'Countryfile' manner of "Isn't life wonderful and quaint in't country?".

This area of the country is starting to be recognised and understood in a manner that acknowledges not only the uniqueness of this demographic but also their place in the wider picture of the industrial North and because of this, new opportunities will become evident for photographers (rural

and urban) who will explore and understand the people and landscape of this region as never before.

John Darwell