

# The Way We Are

MARTIN PARR revolutionised contemporary photography with his candid, colourful and often absurd images of people in Britain and the rest of the world. Now a new documentary chronicling his work is introducing him to a new audience. Its director, LEE SHULMAN, tells *Prestige* why the unstoppable photographer isn't finished yet.

Words: MADELAINE CLARK

It's often said that the work of any great artist is inherently polarising, which is probably an apt description for that of photographer Martin Parr, who's spent the last four decades documenting the eccentricities, absurdities and often tender tragedies of British society. Known for his candid and colourful style, use of tight frames, saturated colours, flash and getting up close to his subjects, which include fish and chips, holidaymakers on pebble beaches, village fetes, street parties, ballroom-dancing halls, fast food and global tourism, his visually striking images also serve as critique of the excesses of consumerism.

Filmmaker Lee Shulman recalls his first exposure to Parr's work as a film student in London. "I remember looking at it going, 'I don't know if I find this disgusting or if this is actually the best thing I've ever seen,'" he says. "And that's the best thing about Martin: he makes you uncomfortably funny, so he puts you in that position of loving and hating his work at the same time."

Despite being firmly accepted – and celebrated – by the mainstream today and a prolific output that includes 100 books of his work, collaborations with Jacquemus

and commissions from American *Vogue*, Parr's work was once misunderstood and criticised as being anti-humanist. "It was everything that was the opposite of what you found in photography back then," says Shulman. In fact, in 1994, when it was suggested Parr join Magnum Photos, the photography cooperative co-founded by Henri Cartier-Bresson, half its members said they'd quit if he was admitted and the other half said they'd leave if he wasn't.

Now we can make up our own minds about him with the release this year of *I Am Martin Parr*, a first retrospective documentary of the photographer, which Shulman directed in partnership with Dogwoof Productions. A lifelong fan of Parr's work, Shulman, who directs advertising and music videos, is also the founder of The Anonymous Project, the world's largest collection of amateur photography. The pair met in France at the Arles photography festival and went on to collaborate on a book together. When Shulman asked Parr if he could make the film, the reply was a one-worded email: Yes.

"The only way you can do a film on Martin is by actually knowing Martin,"





says Shulman, speaking to *Prestige* via Zoom. “He’s very much in his own world, but because I break that barrier, I can get through to him. And I’m lucky he really trusted me to do this. He never even saw a cut of the film until it went into the cinema.”

The one-hour eclectic feature follows the unassuming Parr – sandals, Zimmer frame and camera round his neck – on a road trip around the UK, re-visiting places such as New Brighton in Merseyside and West Yorkshire, where he shot some of his most famous images. Alongside the man himself, other interviewees include artist Grayson Perry, American photographer Bruce Wilden, Magnum’s Paris gallery director Samantha McCoy, and Parr’s wife, Susie.

The film portrays the workaholic 73-year-old photographer still obsessively hunting for photos. “I’m constantly searching for them, and they remain elusive, but that’s the fun, and that’s what keeps me being a photographer,” says Parr in the film. Even while in hospital recovering from a recent cancer battle, his wife recalls catching him photographing his food tray and the staff.

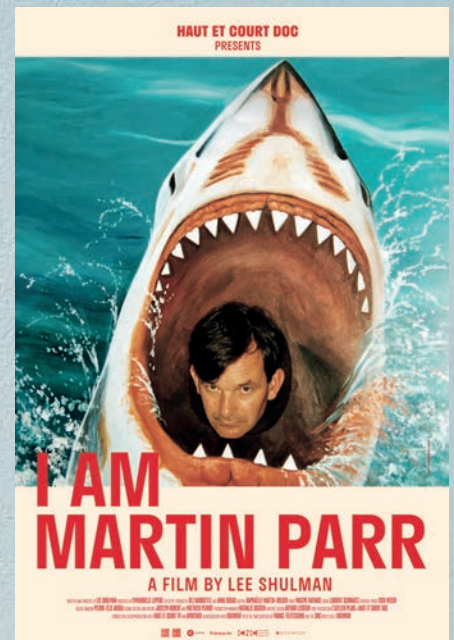
“He’s unstoppable,” says Shulman. “He’s so engrossed in his work that he’d just forget about us, which was also kind of great for the film; he’d run off every time he saw something to photograph. But at times he also let me get very close to him, which is important in a film about Martin, because he gets so close to his subjects. When most people take a photo they take a step back, but he just goes in a step. I thought, If I’m going to make a film, I have to do that as well.”

The documentary begins with a montage of Parr’s work before taking us back to his roots, showcasing his first photograph taken in 1963 – a black and white image of his father on a frozen stream in Surrey, where he grew up. His interest in the medium was encouraged by his grandfather, an avid

photographer, and by the age of 13 he’d already decided on a career, later studying photography at Manchester Metropolitan.

Although to the layman Parr’s oeuvre is synonymous with full frontal colour, he worked in black and white for nearly a decade. His first major body of work, *The Non-Conformists*, documents community life in Hebden Bridge, the rural Yorkshire town he moved to after graduating. With images of Methodist and Baptist chapels, grannies asleep in church pews, afternoon teas, nuns having ice cream in a park, and abandoned Morris Minors, the early work hints at the quirks and subtle humour that would later define his style.

When Parr moved to colour in the early ‘80s, “the photography world would never be the same again,” recalls Shulman. His first series in colour, *The Last Resort*, was shot between 1983 and 1985 in New Brighton, the unglamorous portraits depicting



I Am Martin Parr film poster

Director Lee Shulman and Martin Parr during the documentary’s filming

holidaymakers against a backdrop of a rundown and decaying seaside resort document working-class life during the Margaret Thatcher years.

Despite colour becoming mainstream by the 1970s, black and white was still considered the more serious form of social photography, and the series was viewed as radical. In the film, artist Grayson Perry calls out the “cultural snobbery” to which Parr’s work was subjected. “There’s so much performative seriousness in art,” says Perry, “where people think misery is somehow more important in art than humour.”

*The Last Resort* and Parr’s subsequent series *The Cost of Living* were also criticised for being cynical, exploiting and poking fun at the working classes, something Parr disputes. “I’m trying to show the Ying and Yang of British society,” he says, “and to show it as I find it, as opposed to some idea of it being romantic or good or bad, and to try and show both things, not a romanticised version but purely as it is. Perhaps the great thing

*Parr in New Brighton.  
Below: Parr’s image  
of tourists on Canton Road*



about Britain is the sense of humour, and people are funny. I don’t think of myself being a humourist photographer, but naturally life is strange and life is funny.”

By chance the filming coincided with King Charles III’s coronation in May 2023 and follows Parr photographing street parties and a South Asian community centre on the day, along with tombola games, face painting and Union Jack costumes. For Shulman, who’s been living out of England for 23 years, the homecoming was significant. “Because of Brexit, I fell out of love with the

UK enormously,” he says. “I have to thank Martin, because going on this trip with him made me fall back in love with England and everything about the UK, which is so special and so crazy and fun. I was amazed at the generosity of the people we met; they all welcomed us with open arms.”

As well as Britain, from the mid-1980s onwards, Parr was increasingly interested in documenting the excessiveness of consumerism and the early years of mass travel. The film features his images of shopping trolleys piled high with booze after

the inaugural duty-free ferry service from Britain to France, as well as his photos of mass-produced junk food. While seemingly harmless, Parr’s garish, up-close images of hotdogs, doughnuts and McDonald’s make the viewer feel slightly uneasy.

“There’s always a picture of the food on the front and then, when you open it up, it looks completely different. I think that shows the basic lie we’re all being told. Our greed for the consumables in the world is going to be partly responsible for global climate warming. I’m aware of things like this, and I’m glad my photographs introduce it, although very subtly,” says Parr in the film.

In 1995 Parr published *Small World*, a selection of his images documenting the impact of globalisation on tourism. Parr took his camera to Copacabana Beach in Rio, Venice, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Giza and Machu Picchu, where, of course, his subjects aren’t the places themselves but the people in them.

In 2013 Parr was invited by Mini Chun of Blindspot Gallery to do a month-long project in Hong Kong. “Recognising Martin Parr’s keen interest in cultural eccentricities, food cultures, consumerism and tourism, I invited him to undertake a photographic project here. Parr visited the city in 2013,



*Clockwise from above: Parr's image of a Hong Kong butcher; a photo from his Last Resort series; early work in black and white*

amid heightened socio-political tensions with mainland China," Chun says. His snapshots of the city capture everyday urban life: mainland tourists queuing on Canton Road, racegoers at Happy Valley, butchers in the wet markets and commuters on the Star Ferry. The images were exhibited in his first solo show in the city and led to the publication of *Hong Kong Parr*. Chun remembers the project as "a visual archive of Hong Kong during a pivotal and rapidly changing period of social integration following its handover in 1997."

Japan has also been a perennial subject for Parr. In fact, Shulman cites his favourite series as *Japonais Endormis*, the images Parr took of sleeping workers on the Tokyo subway in 1998, which were exhibited in Paris and published in a book of the same name. "You have all these Japanese workers who are overworked, absolutely exhausted, and fall asleep on the Metro. And Martin decides to photograph them in close-ups from the top of their heads. I find that's the genius of Martin: he goes in with an idea, a visual construct of how he wants to document something, and sticks to it." This year Parr was invited to capture cherry-blossom season in Kyoto, with an exhibition series at the *Kyoto Graphie* film festival in April.

There's also been interest in China, where

in March Fotografiska Shanghai held a five-month-long exhibition of Parr's work. Named *Short & Sweet*, the show brought together 400 images taken during the past 50 years, including a section dedicated to those taken in China, as well as a screening of the film, which Shulman attended remotely. "The more we show the film around the world, in places like China, what's amazing is that it's such a different aesthetic, and yet they totally get the idea of what Martin was saying politically and the messages he had," says Shulman. "That's what's so great about his work – it's very accessible in some respects." In fact, the film ends with Parr at a book signing in Paris, where even in the bourgeois capital his work still commands huge affection.

Shulman believes the film has helped inspire the next generation of photographers. "What I absolutely love is that people who

aren't into photography and don't know anything about Martin really love the film and want to find out more about this amazing guy; a whole new generation is discovering Martin. You know, he's kind of opened a lot of doors for people to become interested in photography."

How does Shulman see Parr's work being remembered 50 years from now? "I really think there's a before Martin Parr and after Martin Parr. There are people that come along and everything changes, whether it's in photography or fashion or art. But for me, when Martin came along, he changed photography and really pushed it on to the next place." 📷

*I Am Martin Parr is available online streaming platforms and is showing at Elements, West Kowloon on August 10*