

'Of course there are throughout the work connections to other people's photographs. I'm not denying that some of these pictures haven't been done before in the sense of the theme,' says Roberts:

I mean Tony Ray Jones looked at a number of these things, as did Martin Parr. I'm very much putting myself in this lineage of photographers that have looked at the British landscape (or in my case the English landscape). But what I tried not to be is derivative in the way that I photographed them. So I'm trying to find a very distinct visual aesthetic I suppose.

True to his word, Robert's pictures are unmistakably his own. Photographed in colour with a tripod-mounted 5 × 4 plate camera, they exhibit a disciplined compositional restraint, a richness of palette, and – often – a wealth of narrative incident. *Derby Day, Epsom Downs Racecourse, Surrey*, 7th June 2008, for example, uses an elevated vantage point and a strong receding diagonal (devices that recur throughout *We English*) to offer an overview of the fairground picnickers at one of the most important dates in the country's sporting calendar. The size of Roberts' negative ensures that there is an abundance of amply legible detail: Pringles, Walkers crisps and Carlsberg beer, Lacoste tops, coolbags and form guides. His intent to mine the country's overlooked moments – the trivial and the quotidian – is made good.

'For me,' he explains:

the richest of the pictures are those where you get a lot of detail and you have to study them for a while. So the formal composition is very simple but it's a way of looking at scenes where there's a lot of information. The pictures are almost like maps to be read; and the details extend the interest in them. I think a picture like that will have historical interest – it's almost anthropological in some ways: England at play in 2008.

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ON PHOTOGRAPHY

SUSAN SONTAG

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Susan Sontag (1933–2004), engaged intellectual, essayist, playwright, novelist and film-maker came to prominence in, and was herself a unique

product of, the cultural climate that existed in America in the early 1960s. Modernism, that once vital force, had all but exhausted its energies, its previously radical credentials undermined by its absorption into the cultural mainstream. The avant-garde now found itself embraced by the same bourgeoisie it had once sought to *épater*, thus becoming a victim of its own success.

In 1977 Sontag, in a gesture of immense self-confidence, published *On Photography*, now re-issued by Penguin books in elegantly designed silver and black covers. It is generally regarded as one of her finest achievements (winning, in 1977, the National Book Critic's Circle Award for Criticism), though one not produced without considerable effort. As Sontag said of the book, in 1992, 'I've had thousands of pages for a thirty page essay. *On Photography*, which is six essays, took five years. And I was working every single day'. It constitutes a contentious love-hate letter to the 'quintessential art of affluent, wasteful, restless societies', and remains the best introduction to the subject, being not only a fairly comprehensive brief history but Sontag's finest display of her synthetic skills, managing to incorporate nearly everything that has been thought or said on photography into a free-flowing argument that would become one of her perennial themes: how photography – and by extension film and television – those 'clouds of fantasy and pellets of information' have become 'pseudo presence' more real than the real itself in a world dependent on their production and consumption.

There are three key ways in which the emergence of modern photography constitutes for Sontag a 'new visual code'. The first of these, she suggests, because of photography's convenience and ease, has resulted in an overabundance of visual material. As taking photographs is now a practice of the masses, owing to a decrease in camera size and increase of ease in developing photographs, we are left in a position where 'just about everything has been photographed'. We no longer, Sontag tells us, as we once did, feel entitled to view only those things in our immediate presence or that affected our micro world; we now seem to feel entitled to gain access to any existing images. Sontag continues, 'In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notion of what is worth

looking at and at what we have the right to observe'.

Secondly, Sontag charts the effect of modern photography on our education, claiming that photographs 'now provide most of the knowledge people have about the look of the past and the reach of the present'. Even if we have not visited the Parthenon or Ephesus, we have a good idea of what they look like from photographs of these places: photography teaches us about those parts of the world that are beyond our touch in ways that literature cannot.

Thirdly, Sontag also discusses the way in which photography desensitises its audience. She introduces this topic by telling her own story of the first time she saw images of horrific human experience. At 12 years old, Sontag stumbled upon images of holocaust camps and was so distressed by them she says, 'When I looked at those photographs something broke ... something went dead, something is still crying'. Sontag argues that it was not good to see these images as a young girl, before she could comprehend what the holocaust was. The viewing of these images has left her a degree more numb to any following horrific image she viewed, as she had been desensitised.

The six richly allusive essays that form *On Photography* were written in the 15,000-book, Borgesian library of Sontag's Manhattan apartment. Despite her acknowledgement of the relative merits of camp and kitsch in her writings, Sontag believed in a high seriousness, in which the reader bears as much responsibility for learning as the writer does for teaching. Seeing Sontag speak on London's South Bank not long before she died, I was struck not just by her seriousness but by her presence. She was tall and big-shouldered; her voice was pitched low, mannish, humorous, impatient; but most of all I recall her quickness of mind, and how, in a 90-minute lecture, she could, with authority, cover so much intellectual terrain, and on subjects with which I was barely familiar.

The literary world seems much more sparsely populated with Susan Sontag gone. She had the energy and the wide-ranging interests of a dozen other writers, and seemed not only a prodigious intellect, but a compassionate spirit, whose mind, like Ariel's, circled the globe in a few seconds.

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