

The Shifting Authority of Auntie: BBC4 Photography Season

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It has been ten years since the BBC launched the six-part series, *The Genius of Photography*, described - in their own words - as “the first major television history of this ever more influential artform”. It is about time, then, that Auntie took stock. Spring 2017’s Photography Season is a loose cluster of programmes made up of a sequence of newly-commissioned works. These include a three-part series on British photography, an hour-long exploration of family photography, a new edit of old material from the BBC archives, and a new instalment in the longstanding documentary series, *What do Artists do all Day?* featuring street photographer Dougie Wallace. Although there is no related publication, as there had been with Gerry Badger’s *Genius* book, the season coincides with a substantial partner exhibition - sharing its title with the series *Britain in Focus: A Photographic History* - at the recently renamed Science and Media Museum.

On Camera: Photography at the BBC offers a handy meta-narrative to the channel’s engagement with the subject over a sixty year period. An hour’s worth of archival clips are drawn from several generations of cultural programming including *Omnibus*, *Arena* and *The Late Show*, alongside photographically themed extracts from current affairs offerings, from *Panorama* to *Whicker’s World*. BBC documentaries from the 1960s, covering subjects from war to fashion, were undoubtedly heroic in their focus on those that were seen as masters of their art. Whether the subject was Norman Parkinson, David Bailey or Larry Burrows, the tone was reverential, if occasionally bemused. At the same time that these were produced, however, a parallel set of didactic programmes aired, featuring photography in the service of education, such as *Science Sessions: A Picture in the Camera* from 1965, or *Better Photography* from the same year. These were much less predictable in their formats. In the latter, direct-to-camera instruction about composition and technique combined the

technical guidance of the camera club with the earnest style of Open University broadcasting. While BBC programmes continue to be produced in celebration of feted practitioners (more of this later) it is much harder to imagine a straightforward how-to photography programme being commissioned in the twenty-first century. Despite the public service remit of the broadcaster, the authoritarian even moralising tone of voice would sit uncomfortably in present-day programming schedules. The narrative tone of 2017's *On Camera*, by contrast, is much more playful. Voiced by games show host Victorian Coren Mitchell, the tenor is warm and not a little mocking. Clips are showcased, at times, for their comic value; certainly their historical awkwardness is treated with the kind of ironic pleasure usually reserved for flicking through outmoded knitting patterns. Coren, for example, smirkingly likens the flirty manner of fashion photographer Terence Donovan to Mike Myer's spoof 1960s character Austin Powers. When Susan Sontag appears in a clip from 1978 documentary - *It's Stolen your Face* - loosely built on her book *On Photography*, she is dressed in stereotypical beatnik style, complete with indoor sunglasses and a portrait of Warhol. Her solemn, nihilistic pronouncements appear heavy-handed in the context of *On Camera's* light entertainment.

A similar tone of voice is deployed in *Smile: The Nation's Family Album*. Over an hour, the programme maps a timeline of British social history against the changing technologies and practices of family photography. Isy Suttie, a performer best known for her portrayal of the character Dobby in the comedy series *Peep Show*, provides a soft but sometimes sarcastic voiceover for the study. Informed by an open call for photographic contributions by British families as well as wide consultation with miscellaneous professionals (I acted as one of the early advisors to the programme), the result examines mostly extremes of endeavour in the context of the family. This includes ambitious cross-generational photography practices, those who have taken a photograph of the same family member every day for 21 years, and a family that took 16,000 photographs in 16 months for a *Telegraph*-funded project in the 1990s. Despite the purported universal nature of the practice, small collections of family photographs documenting ordinary lives evidently do not make striking television programmes. The highly particular examples of practice in *Smile* are interspersed

with a range of fascinating historic footage - from camera adverts to photographic factory production - as well as statements from specialists drafted in as talking heads. The calibre of contributors is high, and includes curator Colin Harding alongside sociologists of popular photographic practice, David Frohlich, Gillian Rose and Gil Pasternak. What is rather frustrating, given the challenges that each scholar has mounted to current thinking, is how banal the final edit of their interpretation becomes. Little is seen of Rose's ideas that new mothers mediate their maternal ambivalence through infant photography, for example, or Pasternak's argument that family photographs can function as radical acts of defiance in fraught political conflicts. Instead general statements about the emotional value of photography to the family are reiterated. In the high-speed social history of twentieth century Britain through a photographic lens, depth is sacrificed for overview and sophistication for sentiment.

Britain in Focus: A Photographic History has greater scope for depth in its three hours. Former *Guardian* news photographer and picture editor, Eamonn McCabe, presents an inclusive overview of the subject, and his insider view – he speaks of ‘we’ photographers – offers a more convincing narration than the programmes mentioned above. McCabe is an appealing front man, in crumpled half-mast trousers and windswept hair, and a significant proportion of the programme is dedicated to intercut edits of him nodding encouragingly to his interviewees and performing his trade in parallel settings to the historical settings he describes. The sweep, from Henry Fox-Talbot to Instagrammers, is wide but well done. Inevitably there is a roster of ‘masters’ – “pioneers”, as McCabe prefers - but lesser known practitioners, from Vanley Burke to Peter Mitchell, also feature. It is particularly gratifying to see the inclusion of wider practices of visual culture, including photography in illustrated magazines, picture postcards and domestic slideshows, in addition to the usual canonical fare.

The Dougie Wallace edition of *What do Artists do all day?* stands in marked contrast to earlier BBC photography documentaries. Where previously a sometimes patronising and often patrician

commentary offered evaluation, in this format there is no voiceover at all. This is all the more striking given the controversy of Wallace's approach. A photographer best known for his hard, bright grotesques of street life, Wallace's ballsy, invasive approach involves paparazzi-like techniques, flashing in the face of unsuspecting subjects. In Shoreditch and Blackpool his prey are mostly willing victims, although he admits, "it helps if they're a bit drunk". The programme focuses on Wallace's development of new work, *Harrodsburg*, which examines the lifestyles of the super-rich on the streets of Chelsea and Mayfair. Wallace's perspective as a no-nonsense Glaswegian enables him to position his work as a critique of inequality but a major process involves accosting Middle Eastern men in fast cars and Muslim women shopping. Four different middle aged white men – Martin Parr, publisher Dewi Lewis, journalist Peter York and a local "English Eccentric" in the old money mould – line up to reassure him that his work is not racist and sexist. This high-profile support added to the self-justification that proliferates when an artist speaks without challenge created an ethical vacuum, and left me longing for a return to the robust debate of the *Late Show* of the 1980s or even the solid moral certainty of those earnest bearded broadcasters of the 1960s.