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ONE PHOTO

As I lay dying
Karen Shepherdson



As I lay dying, (2015)

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As I lay dying
Karen Shepherdson

Much of the 2015 summer was spent walking the Thanet coastline with my camera. It sounds idyllic: waking, pulling on shorts and tee-shirt and straight onto the beach. 'Idyllic' was almost an accurate description. This part of my life had a beautiful simplicity – childlike rather than childish – playful, redolent of summers past. But in August 2015, the events shown in the image above served to reveal the denser undergrowth of photography.

However, research into seaside photography has taught me that being a beach-photographer – or a photographer who locates herself on the sands - has never been without difficulties. We naively think that *this* is the age of camera-suspicion, or more accurately, suspicion of the photographer's motives. But history suggests otherwise.

Early seaside photographers plying their trade through cheap, while-you-wait photographic portraits were routinely characterised as 'bodgers' or 'smudgers', descriptive terms signifying a generalised ineptness and beyond this, a questioning of character. The photographer-on-the-sands was routinely associated with alcohol excesses and calculated ploys to get 'clients' to pose and part with their cash.

In the late 1940s John Steinbeck makes reference to the continued suspicion prompted by the camera's presence:

The camera is one of the most frightening of modern weapons...the camera is a feared instrument, and a man with a camera is suspected and watched wherever he goes.
(Steinbeck; [1949]1994:5)

While something of an exaggeration, the grain of truth is magnified in our contemporary era by further complexity: where suspicion is amplified through a general cultural anxiety around motivations for image making and image distribution and heightened further when children are included in the frame. The camera and thus the photographer in certain contexts can become, in Steinbeck's assertion, 'weaponised'; a threat amplified in contexts where states of undress are the norm and where children are at play.

Nevertheless, children are included in my image making. A continual delight for me, through my location at the seaside, is seeing 'free range' children, typically beyond the reach of structured parental-led activities. On the sands I observe, regardless of nationality, race or gender, children choreograph new friendships, share beach paraphernalia such as spades, buckets and simple fishing nets and how they play in parallel and together at the water's edge. It is at this edge where I make my pictures.

But in the summer of 2015 something changed. In one moment I unselfconsciously raised my camera to make a picture and in the next a small, unnoticed child standing to one side pointed to me and cried out 'Paedo!'. Within an instant a cluster of nearby children joined the chorus of "Paedo!, Paedo!". In that moment, I realised that no public alarm was more piercing than that particular chant.

My camera came down and I flinched, at both the alarm call and the anticipated approach/reproach of the parents. I regretted too the cultural implications of such young children having this abbreviated word in their vocabulary. I was to learn over the course of the summer that this epithet is shared across many European languages. After that incident I developed what I can only define as a photographic stammer. I would head off each day, but return without even having lifted the camera. Or I would hesitate in bringing the camera up and so miss the picture.

The ripples of the chant were still there. But a timely visit to the Photographers' Gallery and Shirley Baker's exhibition 'Women, Children and Loitering Men' proved therapeutic. Baker used

a TLR, and with good reason: the TLR camera unlike a rangefinder remains low, the photographer's face remains visible and a conversation can continue whilst pictures are being made. I headed back out with my own ancient TLR and felt utterly liberated. Such a seemingly simple change meant that not only was I making pictures, but felt empathetically (re)connected to those I was photographing.

So it was on a hot dry day in August 2015 I found myself on Margate sands. I was in a light mood, carrying the TLR along with an unobtrusive digital compact and talking to people on the beach with my former ease. Suddenly a man collapsed and appeared to be in a very bad way. It quickly became apparent that things were critical. I sat, perhaps just twenty-feet away and along with many others watched how the young lifeguards with a doctor who happened to be on the sands and then the swiftly arriving paramedics worked tirelessly to save this man. His heart had stopped and the medical team kept going while his family of several generations gathered nearby in shattered, dignified silence.

During this time people stood and watched – I watched – and then to my left I saw a man, dressed for the beach, stroll into the scene and in a moment his long lens went up. I watched him for a while as he shot in rapid succession. Then, to his right, a group of young men whom I had earlier seen playing beach football clustered together, one of them pulled out a mobile 'phone and took a group 'selfie', their pose carefully angled to allow the unfolding action to be in their pictured background.

Yet I too photographed this scene and later wondered about the doubly ironic notion of whether capturing an image of photographic voyeurism is also itself voyeuristic. To retreat from what I had seen, I wandered to my favourite coastal spot, far from the crowds of Margate's main sands. I stayed there for a long time and as the sun set I saw a young father take his small child into the shallows for a final dip. The sun was now so low that they stood in the last beam of light. He was using his mobile 'phone to photograph his child. He lovingly teased her to make her chuckle, their joyful chatter in a language unfamiliar to me. Almost involuntarily my camera came up and I took the scene. In many ways the image was of course clichéd, except for that moment reminding me of how the coastline's edge photographically cuts both ways: from the misanthropic to the empathetic image. The most hostile act I had experienced on the beach had not been aimed at me; it was not the protective mother signalling that the camera was unwelcome, nor children taunting me with cries of 'paedo'. Rather, it was witnessed by me, where the public death of a man became the focus of the photographic long lens and a seaside selfie.

References

Steinbeck, J. [1949] 1994. *A Russian Journal*. London: Minerva (Whilst this text specifically focuses on Steinbeck's travels in Russia with Robert Capa, it is noteworthy that the author clearly connotes a universal response to the camera as being a 'feared instrument'.)

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