

Fifty Great Years of the Colour Supplement

To celebrate fifty years of the *Sunday Times* magazine, taken by some fifty years ago to be a new art form and called by the late Morris Shapira “a weekly advert for the affluent society”, *The Sunday Times* naturally published a special issue. Most prominent, of course, are articles about sex (the high proportion of reproduced covers that feature naked or semi-naked women is notable), recording with astonishment that fifty years ago divorce was rare, pre-marital virginity ordinary, and “I knew that it was possible to make love lying down or standing up, but that was about it.” (p. 25) So we have witnessed a great increase in human knowledge.

This celebratory issue naturally contains a full-colour brochure—notably more insular than *The Sunday Times* used to be—of “the 50 most influential Britons of the last fifty years”, “50 makers & shakers”. These most influential are, by and large, those most gossiped about. The list begins with Literature, as if there is still such a thing, and with Helen Fielding (“Fielding struck gold with her *Bridget Jones* novel in 1996”); Nick Hornby, a respectable novelist; Michael Holroyd, Biographer; J. K. Rowling, author of “the best selling literary series of all time . . . and a dollar billionaire”; Virginia Wade (ah no, I see literature wasn’t enough for two pages so we have gone over to sport), but dominating the rest, over both pages of Literature, Martin Amis, author of “incandescent novels” but also “an extraordinary magnet for gossip”. No poets, no historians, no critics, no philosophers. On this showing, no literature.

Art likewise gets not quite two pages before a single column of theatre (Olivier and Scofield not mentioned). First artist: Charles Saatchi, “co-founder of advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi” but most prominent, Bridget Riley, whose “dizzying, eye-boggling paintings quickly spread beyond the art world, into fashion and furniture.” Yes. Next page, representing photography, is David Bailey, the recorder of “celebrity-ism” with photos “about people—or the residue of people” with portraits of “the Beatles, the Stones, Twiggy” and so on. Fashion next, oddly thought to be a distinct class, with a page for two supermodels and one designer. Then Food (Jamie Oliver and Delia Smith), Broadcasting: only two entries, David Attenborough and John Peel (“so much more than a mere DJ”). Politics gets a bit at the bottom of the same column with two small entries for Blair and Thatcher. Modesty no double precludes a list of journalists.

And so on. The head of the Business entry is another advertising man, Martin Sorrell. Most of the three quarters of a page on science are taken up with publicists and pseudo-philosophers (several genuine scientists again unmentioned). The other quarter is devoted to a single “Icon”, the late Princess of Wales. Her Majesty the Queen, in the year of her diamond jubilee, doesn’t make the *Sunday Times* fifty: not influential enough?

There is a whole page of Music. (One of the two Beatles listed also gets a page interview later in the magazine.) Two thirds of the page is given to Amy Winehouse, probably because she died last year. Though one of the entries “revealed a fiercely original musical mind at work” the page does not include a single performer or composer of any claim to greatness, nor need it. *Great* is not the word. This is “50 makers and shakers”, “the 50 most influential Britons”, not fifty great. Is the *idea* of greatness still utterable?

The style of the paragraphs accompanying these pictures is discussed in a forthcoming publication of ours, Michael Wallerstein’s short book *The Liza Doolittle Syndrome*. To take just one phrase, about the Icon

The national blubfest that followed her death was another royal shock for the old guard.

Yes. I wonder to what extent the colour supplements have been makers as well as recorders of this English decadence.