

**Storytelling and Experience in John Berger's  
Works**

**Abstract of Thesis Submitted to  
Jadavpur University  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Arts)**

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**2022**

The introduction to the thesis has three parts: the first one deals with what Walter Benjamin saw as the poverty of experience in the 20th Century and his ambivalent take on the philosophical category of experience; the second deals with early influences on Berger's art criticism of socialist realism, cultural praxis of the working class, works of Gramsci and Leger, mass-media advertising culture and Cubism; and the third deals with Berger's adoption of the form of storytelling, in art-criticism as well as fiction, particularly after his novel *G.* (1972) and his appropriation of the eponymous figure of the storyteller from Benjamin's "The Storyteller" in his inquiry into the status of experience in late modernity. Critical intervention for Berger is not necessarily discontinuous with his storytelling pursuits: it is an unbidden response that a writer comes up with, when he feels compelled to take action or engage in a polemic on the subject or when he feels he has the tools – ideological and intellectual – to address a crisis.

In his 1936 essay "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin points out that "something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences" (83). While interrogating what constitutes experience and its shareability, the idea of alterity should always involve the recognition of the division between the one and the other, as maintained by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (1961). Benjamin ruminates on an earlier time when it was taken for granted that to be human was to be able to share experiences, particularly inside a community. The stability of a community depended on the recognition of each member of the community as the Other. This is where the figure of the archaic storyteller becomes crucial. The first chapter, titled "Storytelling and the Face of the Other", focuses on the idea of storytelling as a dialogue between the writerly self and the Other through which experience is constructed. It describes the role of the archetypal storyteller in archaic societies and analyses Berger's approximation of that figure in the era of late capitalism, and also within the transactional matrix of oral and print cultures. The idea of 'likeness' that

recurs throughout Berger's works can be theorized to understand how storytelling facilitates the recognition of alterity. In the ethical appropriation of the praxis of storytelling, Berger's ideas are similar to those of Immanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (1961). In Berger, the subjectivity of the narrative persona engages in a relation with the exteriority of experiences it seeks to understand. This affects the differentials of 'Othering' in various ways. The recognition of the division of between the self and the Other seems to lie at the source of empathy in Berger. The idea of 'likeness', which has been theorized, in this chapter by using several instances in Berger's writings, constitutes this division. Examples from essays in his book, *Photocopies* (1996), conversation with Sebastião Salgado about photographing human suffering, the portrayal of Dr Sassall in *A Seventh Man* (1967) and the representation of AIDS in *To the Wedding* (1995) are crucial for understanding the range of the spectrum of narrative empathy that Berger's storytelling ethics deals with.

Berger's conceptualisation of the idea of fame of works of art, when read in conjunction with Benjamin's idiosyncratic and peripatetic ideas about afterlife of texts (through translation and criticism), can offer potentially productive discursive points of departures, notwithstanding the wide difference in historical examples that Benjamin and Berger base their arguments on. Berger's emphasis falls on moments of recognition, or rather on the momentousness of recognition: the interface between the experience of the creation of a work of art and the experience of a reader/listener/viewer accessing it. The 'fame' of a work of art, for Berger, is not restricted to the history of its ownership, the commercial valuation it undergoes in its various stages of reception, the prizes and accolades bestowed on it: its significance lies in the transmissibility of the experience that oversees its creation and its unforeseen assumption of a humanistic value in a future time. The second chapter, titled "Storytelling and the Spectral Afterlife of Texts", discusses the continuing afterlife or survival of experiences through storytelling in the light of Walter Benjamin's essay. "The Task of the Translator" where he

identifies translation as one of the two ways of ensuring the survival of a text. Berger is always conscious of the unforeseeability of the nature of reception of a text or its transformation in the future. This is in line with Benjamin's ideas about the significance of historical events manifesting themselves through a network of experiences and events (to use his image, constellations) in a non-linear way. Derrida's distinction between the future and l'avenir is also used to theorize certain key passages in Berger. The idea of 'likeness' is further theorized in this chapter to discuss Berger's discoveries of visual links between works such as Alborta's post mortem photo of Guevara (1967), Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632) and Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1490). This has affinities with Aby Warburg's *pathosformel*, a kind of gesture language or vocabulary of visual tropes that recur throughout images and icons in Western Europe. This chapter also discusses different roles of the storyteller: as a witness to death and disappearance, and an inheritor of fragmented experiences: the counsels received from dead people in the highly autobiographical *Where We Meet* (2005), the struggles of peasant life in *Pig Earth* epitomized by the figure of Lucie Cabrol; as an editor and compiler of prison letters.

In an interview, when asked about the underlying themes in his works, Berger said: "The first underlying theme from which I can't get away - because it's not something you choose, it is a kind of obligation, a kind of compulsion. I think, the first one is probably to do with the experience of immigration, but in the very broadest sense of the term ... people being displaced, if you wish, either voluntarily or forcibly". Chapter 3, titled "Migration, Homelessness and Exile," discusses the relation between storytelling and displacements in the experience-affirming and experience-denying situations. *A Seventh Man* raises a question that is essential to the current debates about migration – whose pain is legitimate? Collecting, codifying and processing of biometric information like fingerprints and iris scans and pencilling in diagrams and maps establish and put into effect the legitimacy of the migrant's identity as a worker but

the processes involved in legitimising his status exclude his suffering. Berger's concern is primarily empathetic and driven towards the experiential aspect of migration: "A man's resolution to emigrate needs to be seen within the context of a world economic system. Not in order to reinforce a political theory but so that what actually happens to him can be given its proper value. That economic system is neo-colonialism". In the 2010 foreword to the book Berger calls this economic system "economic fascism" – a structure which greatly benefits German, French and British economies. The book tries to suggest that it is feasible, if not uncomplicated, to believe that another's distress deserves attention, kindness and compassion even if one has profited or gained social and economic advantages from that distress. It is increasingly problematical, though not unattainable, to endeavour to intercede and to assuage that pain. *Lilac and Flag* (1990) and *King* (1999) describes what looks like Edward Soja's concept of 'postmetropolis' whereas *And Our Faces, My Love, Brief as Photos* (1984) tries to envision the idea of a place, a lost home through a series of address. This chapter discusses briefly the economic factors behind the production of such spaces and how Berger's storytelling confronts the experiences of dispossession, homeless, and indeed, placelessness. The final part of the chapter discusses the question of commitment with regard to art and politics in Berger's first novel, *A Painter of Our Time* (1958) and tries to explore the relation between exile and political agency.

In French the words attention (*l'attention*) and waiting (*attente*) are etymologically connected. As Berger points out, waiting has disappeared from our cognitive horizon. With the hijacking of attention by a culture of consumerism, the span of contemplation moves between one commodity to the next, thereby rendering consumers increasingly incapacitated to retain meanings or be critical about them. In conclusion, returning to the general discussions about art, commodity, meaningfulness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Berger (and Benjamin) may provide some insights into a) the current problem of decreasing attention span; b) the politics of distraction

engendered by ruling ideologies; c) the need for developing critical empathy. Storytelling practices appear to have a significant relevance for these issues both as a mode of resistance to the powers that be, and a medium appropriated by national and local governments to propagate lies.