

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

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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 on the writer's part, when he feels obliged 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.

By concentrating on what had vanished, Benjamin was able to expand his idea of experience beyond the dominion of mimetic resemblances and religious dogma to take in complex investigations of art, history, narrative, memory, technology, mass culture. Two forms of experience are central to this discussion: *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. While the *Erlebnis* suggests outstanding incidences, unable to produce meaningful recurrences over time, *Erfahrung* has the ability to stand the test of time. Both these forms appear in Berger, although there is a precedence of the latter over the former in the praxis of his storytelling.

Berger's conceptualization of the figure of the storyteller has affinities with the figure of the collector, who appears and disappears in Benjamin's corpus erratically. The collector embodies the approach to experience Benjamin had. He puts side by side things handed down by the collective or idiosyncratic understanding of the past, collecting and collating the scattered constellations of history. Benjamin clarifies that this approach to experience is not reliant on aura because of the presence of a reciprocity of recognition between the subject and the object.

In his 1936 essay “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin points out that what had once seemed inalienable was now being taken away from people, that is, the ability to share and exchange experiences. 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 a bygone era 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 of the thesis entitled “Storytelling and the Face of the Other”, deals with the issues of voice, narration, exteriority with regard to Berger’s storytelling, and looks at the differences between storytelling and the novel. It 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.

In *Bento's Sketchbook*, the narrative persona assumed by Berger and the imagined figure of ‘Bento’ (Baruch Spinoza) coalesce to form a third character or a voice that pervades the entire book. The book itself is constituted of brief observations on issues ranging from the colour of blueberries to profiteering, interspersed with quotes from Spinoza’s *Ethics* (1677) and Berger’s own drawings of his immediate surroundings. Berger comments on these things as he thinks and writes about Spinoza’s centrality to his own ethical thinking. Superficially it might seem that contemplating deeply about a person makes it possible for the thinking subject to affect an amalgamation of his identity and the identity of the person being thought about. However, it

would be nearer the truth to say that the underlying basis of this observation is a recognition that the writer is often called upon, as it were, by the subject he has chosen to write about, and is reminded that he can never totally represent the subject and that the alterity of the subject must always be respected. Berger's notion of the narrative persona and the subject becoming "interchangeable" problematizes the issue of ethical responsibility towards the other which involves recognizing the other as having an exteriority, an infallible and ungraspable 'otherness'. In Berger, the author's authority is always conferred by the subject he is writing about. A constant critical surveillance is at work throughout his storytelling oeuvre which ensures that the persona of the narrator/critic/storyteller/listener is always acquiescent to the ethical responsibility towards the other.

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' has been theorized in this chapter by using several instances in Berger's writings. In order for 'likeness' to occur – and it occurs magically and arrives unexpectedly – the artist must strive through a process that involves certain degree of looking, re-looking and correcting. 'Likeness' can be seen to depend upon a certain process of production, of bringing the artefact to its final culmination through work or labour. The curious incompleteness of a drawing constitutes a 'likeness'. In this, 'likeness' is something approaching total resemblance but always failing to attain it.

Narrative empathy is an important concern in Berger and in order to understand the range of the spectrum of narrative empathy that Berger's storytelling ethics deals with, the following texts have been studied: *Photocopies* (1996), his conversation with Sebastião Salgado about photographing human suffering, *A Seventh Man* (1967) and *To the Wedding* (1995).

The stories in *Photocopies* operate through a mechanism involving two contradictory impulses – the desire to be in the present moment and the desire to be in other places and at other times. These impulses are governed by a Levinasian desire to be hospitable to the Other, to find a kind of liberation, paradoxically, in being a hostage to the Other. The identity of the 'I' that carries the narrative forwards and backwards, forming a sort of constellation of narrated experiences, is not comprehensible: it could be a fictional narrative persona, or it could be Berger himself writing about his own experiences. It could be either imagined or real. The function of the storyteller is to rupture the boundaries of the real and the imagined. Narrative, as Berger conceives it, is a tool where the real and the imagined are enmeshed to a point where they cannot be separated. This raises some important questions about the very category of experience itself. What is the nature of the relation between narrativity and experience? Do all experiences lend themselves to narrative rendition?

"Photographs of Agony" is an essay about Berger's experience of reading in the newspaper about extreme agony suffered by Vietnamese people during raids and bombing carried out by the American air force. Berger's reflections on the growing proliferation of images of depravation and cruelty and violence address the general conditions governing the reception and assimilation of such images – images that depict experiences that we cannot immediately relate to, experiences that are not ours.

Salgado's photographs, as Berger interprets them, give precedence to their documentary nature over their aesthetic considerations. What are the aesthetic options available to a photographer

working in a situation of great human suffering and oppression, we may ask. It can be argued that the aesthetics of photographs of agony is decided by the degree to which it is able to convey the experience that the photographer decided to capture. A writer, working in a medium that is greatly different from that of the photographer, may approach the question of aesthetics differently. Both Salgado and Berger refuse to be anything but specific while talking about pain of others. Salgado's photographs in the book are propelled by the difference he saw in the living conditions of the Rwandans when he visited them after decades: stability of the Rwandans in the early 70s were replaced by migratory transition in the aftermath of the civil war and genocide in the 90s. Photographs are taken in order to elicit a response from the viewer, and as a photographer, Salgado expects that response to be pro-active.

*A Fortunate Man* is a portrait of a general physician working in the Forest of Dean. it focuses on his role as a doctor and his relationship with his patients. Its subject is empathy and it raises an important question: to what extent can a doctor be empathetic toward his patients and still not be moved enough to treat them well?

The ethical considerations of *A Fortunate Man* include the recognition of the privileges of the protagonist as a doctor. Apart from his obvious privileges as a medically trained man who has received knowledge to cure people through his training, he is also privileged to exercise where and how practices as a doctor. Dr Sassall's somewhat over-ambitious confrontation with a person's 'totality' is dubious from the start because of the lack of the means required to undertake project such as this; and more importantly, such confrontations are beyond the scope of his profession. This is the reason why he trusts the limits of his profession and questions the very role of a physician in a community that relies on him and eventually assumes the role of a *passeur* in the sense that he becomes a confidant for the people of the community in diverse ways. Each new experience calls for a different stance and assumption of a position that would

be most suitable for its reception and recording. Experience, for him, has more to do with reflection than endurance. We are reminded here of the Benjaminian distinction between the two meanings of experience – *Erfahrung* (the type of transmittable experience that is accrued over time), and *Erlebnis* (the kind of experience that is lived through and is unintegrated).

Berger's strategy of representing AIDS in *To the Wedding* involves inventing numerous voices whose narratives converge on the character and the experiences of the protagonist who has AIDS, in a rather oblique way, with the result that the actuality of the disease is never discussed.

Ninon is not judged for contracting a disease that is usually associated with sexual promiscuity and deviancy. The writer of the novel and the narrator exhibit tenderness in being able to craft a mode of narration that is non-invasive and sensitive to the suffering of Ninon. Protection, preservation and sustenance are recurring themes in Berger's work that are represented in various forms, both abstract and tangible. Sometimes the power that protects the fragile is also the power that illuminates.

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 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. Often, with Berger, stories begin with an idea of place. The outcome of a story, like the afterlife of a work of art, is incalculable. The function of the storyteller is to release the energies latent in the stories and propel them towards a future where the significance of stories is created anew historically and politically.

If translation is a mode which allows the text to be salvaged from time to time in the form of afterlives, it can be said that the life of a text can co-exist along with its afterlives. In this sense, the prefix 'after' can be understood to be a presence that manifests itself through translations and criticisms and activates, as it were, the life of the text and prevents it from lapsing into stagnation that comes with calculated reception.



The transformation from the oral to the written, of course, brings about certain changes in how the stories are accessed and how the aural is replaced by the visual as the primary mode of access. The interpolation of drawings, empty spaces, blank pages, constitutes not only Berger's poetics of writing but also inform the reader's act of reading. The text, or rather the book, with all its tangibility and tactile impressions, marks the culmination of a long process of production.

The essay on the death image of Che Guevara is about how political struggle and rebellious insurgency assumes ubiquitous presence through a certain kind of death, or rather, a certain approach toward death. The myth has its second life in the image of Guevara's corpse. The afterlives of Guevara's death image are incalculable. Berger finds a parallel in Rembrandt's painting of *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp*. Structurally and compositionally the images are similar. Both of them are images of examination and display and both are characterised by a sense of objectivity and detachment. Both Rembrandt and the photographer are onlookers and witnesses to the act of examination. They may or may not be examining the bodies in question but, their presence is what gives the act of examining a metaphysical sanction. Berger draws another parallel between Guevara's death image and Mantegna's painting of dead Christ. He does not hide the emotional basis of such a comparison. The emotions generated upon viewing a work of art or a documentary photograph for the first time are intensely related to the extent to which the viewer has allowed to be immersed in the experience that the artwork or the photograph depicts. And although these experiences may be separated by centuries, they call up one another. The photograph, a visual record and a documentation of having witnessed the event first hand, transports the image into an indeterminable future where it may assume political significance.

The story recounted in "The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol" is that of a woman born in a peasant community and whose account embodies the struggles faced by women born in her situation

who try to find an identity outside the community. The urgency behind the telling of Lucie's story lies in the need to find a voice that survives repression and erasure – a voice that will speak of peasant experience. Lucie symbolizes the state of peasantry itself, as Berger understands it, occasionally disappearing under changing and hostile economic conditions and re-appearing with unpredictable doggedness to survive. Lucie, apart from being a character in the story, is also a figurative repository of experiences whose lure the narrator cannot resist. These experiences are a culmination, we may say, of the experiences of generations of peasants who have struggled against forces bent on eradicating them. The possibility of transforming the experiences that have been handed down to him through his imagination and narrative craft is an aspect of the lure, the power of which can hardly be underestimated. The idea of survival, according to him, unites peasants everywhere, although what he is primarily concerned with is lives of farmers in rural France and their “disappearance” through emigration. *Pig Earth* is on one level a literary homage to the survival of peasants and the activity of writing stories about that survival is an extension of the labour invested by the peasants towards the survival.

In *Here is Where We Meet*, the characters gain precedence over places. The reader is made to travel imaginatively to the places described in the stories solely because the writer's memory of the people he meets (or wants the reader to meet) is inseparably connected to the spatial arrangements and geographic/demographic features of the places. For Berger, the places he describes in *Here is Where We Meet*, are also of historical interest. The narration constitutes of both descriptions of the present experiences undergone by the narrator and references to certain historical events or themes which may contain some valence for the present. By placing temporally different frames of references, Berger attempts to bring into effect a convergence of experiences. One has the impression of inhabiting a narrative space where different time-frames co-exist, like different yet typical architectural designs in a city. Of course, the conjuring up of such convergences and its narratorial arrangement is idiosyncratic and personal. To read

the stories in *Here is Where We Meet* is to share in the idiosyncrasies of the author. However, in the book are not only documents of the author's wanderings and personal records of his study of appearances, but also a prescription to the reader to approach the phenomenology of visual appearances by considering the role played by the concatenation and comparison of experiences in making sense of the visible world.

In "The Storyteller", Benjamin talks about three locations from which stories emerge: the rural, the maritime and the urban. Berger, in *From A to X*, Berger, goes beyond this tripartite scheme and includes the prison as an experience-affirming site from which stories may also emerge. *From A to X* is composed of letters that A'ida writes to her lover Xavier who is in prison, some unsent letters written by Xavier and a few scribblings that he makes on some of A'ida's letters. It is a book that is epistolary not only in form but also in intent. The letters lean, as it were, towards a time when they will be read, and the experiences that gave rise to the letters, understood. There are two versions of reality that come off in the letters: the immediate reality of the situations and people in A'ida's life and the reality of the political and global economic order of Xavier's jottings. These complimentary views of the world – the immediate and the general, the sensuous and the abstract, the close-at-hand and the out-of-reach, collaborate to constitute a sense of the real that is defended as a mode of resistance to the factors that try to disorient and dislocate the lives of prisoners. Human displacement, delocalization and imprisonment are the major themes of the book.

The writer as a compiler of the letters is endowed with the responsibility of recognising and respecting the intimacy of the exchange and extending his hospitality to the experiences of A'ida and Xavier by giving them a shelter in the form of a book. The recognition and the respectful gesture are constitutive of the processes through which the book came about. The compiler of the letters is also the *passeur* in this book. His role is similar here to the role of

John, the narrator of his first novel, *A Painter of Our Time*, who takes up the responsibility of arranging the diary entries of the fictional Hungarian painter, Janos Lavin.

Berger identified forced and voluntary migration as the most important of the underlying themes in his works. 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. 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.

*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 many of Berger's stories, metropolises play a crucial role. Cities are seen as places, partly real and partly imagined, and almost always as a space of convergence of remembrance, aspiration, and hopelessness, that take place in the backdrop of late capitalism and various forms of resistances against capitalism. The last part of the *Into their Labours* trilogy, *Lilac and Flag: An Old Wives' Tale of the City* (1990) is set in the severe urban anonymity and realism of Troy, an invented, hyperreal Metropolis. *Here is Where We Meet* (2005) offers a mélange of novelistic writing, essay and memoir where the narrator (Berger himself) meets people from his past (people who have died) in several European cities such as Lisbon, Geneva, Madrid, London and Krakow. The urban setting of the novel *King: A Street Story* (1999) is exacting and hostile. It is worthwhile to consider if Berger 'totalizes' or universalizes the experiences of the poor and the homeless he writes about in several works, and to read Berger's writings on resistance in their proper contexts. His fictive or semi-real wanderings across the cities are also movements back and forth in time and place.

Edward Soja finds an overriding critical interest in Berger in the convergence of space and time. Soja, in his book, seems to have been particularly taken up with an aphoristic statement in Berger's *The Look of Things* (1972) which he quotes recurrently in *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) and *Postmetropolis* (2000). *Lilac And Flag* offers a critique of the process of urbanization which Henri Lefebvre had already identified as a process integral to the perpetuation of capitalism in *The Urban Revolution* (1970). This process also includes the gradual erasure of the distinction between the city and the country by creating integrated spaces that can be termed, after Soja, postmetropolis. These spaces are formally complex due to concurrent deterritorialization and reterritorialization and dismantling of extant urban realities and the re-orienting the city along new socio-economic lines. Production of postmetropolises erases the idea of place and of the territorially identifiable social communities. Consequently,

a new spatiality develops where the boundaries between the interior and the exterior have become indistinct.

In *King*, Berger develops a different kind of allegorical structure in order to bring to light the world of the superfluous people that market forces refuse to see. These people wander through the city but are not its part. They are only noticed when they commit a crime. In *Consuming Life* (2007), Zygmunt Bauman talks about the vulnerability of the 'underclass' in contemporary consumer society, in what he terms 'liquid modernity', which underscores flexibility as symptomatic of the present time. Globalization condenses the growing mobility of capital and socially privileged, leading to stratification of the present consumer society. He also points out that for the poor mobility is not a convenient choice, and that spatial segregation is coterminous with social isolation. Bauman points out that there is a growing tendency on the part of the well-off sections to isolate themselves volitionally in groups like residential communities, while the poor are consigned to the imposed ghettos, where they are categorised and regarded as an unwanted and unusable underclass.

Berger's *A Painter of Our Time* (1958) reconnoitres the themes that became his chief concerns throughout his career, the foremost of which is the connexion between the artist and society. This theme is examined in the novel with all its political implications and is outlined by the unending interrogation of the ontological issues of exile and assimilation in modernity. The novel explores the impasse confronted by Janos Lavin, a Hungarian expatriate painter living in London during the 1956 Uprising. It is organized around the unearthing of his diary, which is comprised of four notebooks of drafts by his friend John (a fictionalized version of Berger himself).

The amalgamation of politics and art, which Berger rather challengingly depicts as the source of real experience, is located as either a figment in Lavin's memory or an indistinct sprint in

the context of the impending revolution in his country of origin. Exile apparently does not diminish Lavin's sense of dignity, and therefore he does not reveal any need for consolation. The sole emotional sustenance he insists on is the facility of *flânerie* through the city and to contemplate the lives of its populace. Social integration does not seem particularly necessary for him: in fact, estrangement appears to augment the acuity of his observations, and ironically sustains his hope of self-sufficiency.

Berger's grappling with issues ranging from the political to the metaphysical reveals a persistent and dual conviction in arriving at decisions and confronting mysteries. If there is one message that can be derived out of Berger's lifework, it has to be the idea that no final conclusions can be drawn. However, Benjamin's line of inquiry into the politics of contemplation and distraction can be pursued methodologically while researching the significance of reception in Berger's storytelling. Like Benjamin, Berger places a great emphasis on the critical faculty of attention. For Berger, storytelling provides valuable insights into the evolving nature of human perception and how it is shaped by the changing material conditions in the age of corporate capitalism. Benjamin's emphasis on the importance of attention and alertness as a remedy to the equally non-committal extremes of contemplation and distraction in an age of industrial capitalism is in agreement with Berger's conception of storytelling as a medium of recognition and demystification in the age of financial capitalism and neoliberalism. In an alert listening to a story, one listens to not only what the storyteller chooses to say but also the unsaid. Meaning is constructed often from fragments. The storyteller does not explain but hints and signals at the possibility of a set of meanings thereby creating a collaborative space where the reader is invited to participate in the process of meaning-making. It is not the task of the storyteller to explain.

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 21st 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.