The public and the private
John Berger's writing on photography and memory

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In Another Way of Telling John Berger recalls that his close interest in photography began around twenty years earlier – this would put it in the early 1960s – when he wanted to make a series of photographs to accompany a sequence of love poems. Desiring to learn to use a camera, he solicited a photographer's address from film maker Alain Tanner, with whom he would collaborate on several films. In this way he came to meet another important collaborator, Jean Mohr. Berger's four books produced with Mohr lend his writings on photography their first unique trait – the verbal essays are consistently counterpointed by visual essays, the tendrils of the two intertwining, cutting across, conversing with, and extending one another.

His writings which treat photography as their explicit subject belong mostly to the 1970s, a decade overshadowed by Ways of Seeing and G. They include two essays published in The Look of Things in 1972, a cluster of four written from 1972 to 1978 later published in About Looking, and finally Another Way of Telling which was published in 1982. I'm laying out these dates to note, firstly, that his published writings on photography belong to a fairly discrete period, which also marked a threshold in terms of his approach to his other writing projects. Secondly, the dates help to situate Berger's work in relation to other influential theorists of the camera, most notably Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes. Sontag's On Photography was first published in 1977 while Barthes' Camera Lucida appeared in 1980. The proximity between the three is more than a matter of timing – Berger's essay 'Uses of Photography' which was written in 1978 was dedicated to Sontag as a critical response to her book, while many of the themes in Barthes' analysis overlap with Berger's concerns.

There is also, for me, another reason for bracketing the three. In a sense their writings belong to the last generation of photographic theorists who could speak with such conviction about the special relationship between photography and reality as it existed in the era of chemical photography. I would immediately add that I am not implying that their work is now
automatically superseded. I suspect that the best responses to the emerging culture of digital images, in which the direct action of light on film gives way to sampling, and the physical support of the negative is replaced by mathematical data in an image file, will negotiate a route which includes the writings of all these authors, much as Berger's own writings on photography drew from the work of an earlier generation of theorists such as Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer. Certain questions they all address, particularly those concerning the camera's relation to time, memory and meaning, remain active.

Berger is scarcely unique in posing a special relationship between photography and reality – the idea was born with the camera, and developed alongside the very first photographic images. However, the context in which he advanced his theory is worth noting, because, in many respects, any advocate of realism – and this is what Berger is, although in neither a naive nor a simplistic fashion – was on increasingly shaky ground in the 1970s.

At this time a profusion of writers, armed with a heady combination of marxism, semiotics, feminism and psychoanalysis sought to treat photography in terms of its ideological complicity with existing hierarchies of power, analysing the codes through which photographs subjugated women or mystified class relations, or promoted racist assumptions. While this opened up numerous and productive insights, in extreme cases photography was treated as little more than a bourgeois affectation: as Jean Luc Godard once remarked, if the camera didn't exist, the ruling class would have had to invent it.

In this context, Berger's writing on photography stands out firstly because of its refusal of a blanket response. Instead, the pivot of his analysis is ambiguity: on one level, the ambiguity of photographic meaning, but also the ambiguity of photographic practice due to the social and political contradictions in which the camera is embedded. This refusal to homogenise the entire field is important, because it allowed Berger to remain attentive, at a moment when many were not, to different registers of photographic usage.

Let me explain this a bit more clearly. As is well known, the key specificity of photography is the way that photographic images are made, through the action of light, mediated by a mechanical instrument, to record momentary
appearances according to the laws of geometric perspective. It’s important to separate a few things out here. Clearly, the immediate authority of the photographic image in the nineteenth century derived in part from a notion of realism inherited from Renaissance oil painting. It also derived from the faith that nineteenth century European society, under the sway of positivism, sought to invest in the machine as a scientific guarantor of objective truth. And, at a deeper level, it drew upon the historical well of significance that has persistently linked light to truth, passing almost seamlessly from theology to science and techno-science. Berger’s writings show that he is well aware that the varied elements which make up this history are social and political through and through.

However, recognising that photography can be – and often is – used to deceive and misinform didn’t lead him to the conclusion that all photographs are therefore inherently and inevitably ‘deceptive’. A key element of his work is the centrality he gives to formulating a distinction between photography’s public use in advertising and the mass media, and everyday uses, such as keeping an image of a loved one in a wallet or on a bedside table. While these uses are sometimes recounted poignantly – for instance in his writing on the impact of migration – it is important to recognise that Berger’s distinction is not driven solely by his identification with the marginalised. Rather, it stems from thinking about what makes our own photographs so precious to us. Why, for instance, are family photographs often the first possession saved when a home burns? This depth of connection is something that a mechanical semiotics always struggled to explain, except by stigmatising much popular usage as the reflex action of ‘ideological dupes’. Susan Sontag is not exempt from this pattern, insofar as her powerful critique of camera culture leaves little room for ambiguity. And while Barthes undoubtedly defends the private use of photography, exemplified by his elegy to the photograph of his dead mother, he does so in characteristically individualistic terms. In contrast, when Berger tries to answer the question of popular investment in photography, he not only satisfies his political sympathies, but makes an important theoretical contribution to mapping the differential social relations of the camera. Ultimately, it is via his distinction between public and private uses of photography that he elaborates the possibility of an alternative photographic practice.

Berger has been remarkably consistent in his analysis of photography, and
it is worth setting his thinking out in order to see how it departs from both the semiotics of the 1970s, and also from the long history to which semiotics was, in part, a reaction; the history of representation which treats realism as a natural, a-historical category, and photographic objectivity as a self-evident truth. In many respects, Berger's complex realism resembles that advanced by Siegfried Kracauer from the 1920s. Both Berger and Kracauer begin from the relationship between photography and memory, while attempting to situate the historical development of the camera in terms of a wider theory of the social relations of time. Both treat the camera as an instrument capable of unveiling aspects of the social and material world — Berger speaks of revelation, Kracauer of redemption. And each ultimately reads the invention of the camera as an epochal change: a critical, albeit double-edged, factor in the development of political consciousness in modern capitalist society. I'll return to this point later in my paper.

So how is Berger a realist with respect to photography? In his 1972 essay 'Understanding a Photograph', he begins by rejecting the recurrent fashion for subsuming photography into art. While part of his rationale is classic Walter Benjamin, couched in terms of 'infinite reproducibility', this is not central to his thesis. Even at this stage, Berger's refusal of the photography — art analogy arises more from other issues which go to the specificity of each medium. He has frequently discussed photography in relation to painting or drawing in order to define one practice by delineating its contrasts with the other. For instance, he identifies composition as a function of painting and drawing rather than photography. This is not to say that photographers can't compose their images; rather that the nature of the choice they have to make is constitutively different. In Another Way of Telling, he writes:

A drawing is a translation. That is to say each mark on the paper is consciously related, not only to the real or imagined 'model', but also to every mark and space already set out on the paper. Thus a drawing or painted image is woven together by the energy (or the lassitude, when the drawing is weak) of countless judgements. Every time a figuration is evoked in a drawing, everything about it has been mediated by consciousness, either intuitively, or systematically. In a drawing, an apple is made round and spherical; in a photograph, the roundness and the light and shade of the apple are received as a given.
Clearly, this allocation of composition to painting and drawing also implies a hierarchy in which certain types of photographs are excluded from his consideration of photography. In 'Understanding a Photograph', he characterises studio images in which the photographer pre-arranges all the details as 'absurd'; a similar antipathy is evident in his critique of advertising images in Ways of Seeing which appeared the same year.² It's also worth noting that he has never displayed much interest in avant-garde practices such as cameraless photography, photo-montage and the like. With the notable exception of an essay on John Heartfield, his critical attention has gravitated to those he once termed the 'great witnessing masters': Paul Strand, August Sander, Walker Evans, Margaret Bourke-White.

In Berger's eyes, photography works against its own grain when it is not directed towards recording the world's external appearances. This sense of photography's inherent mission is not so much a function of the camera's superior 'realism' — a quantitative mimetic hierarchy of this kind has no place in Berger's thought. Rather it stems from the camera's fundamentally different relation to time compared to painting or drawing:

A drawing contains the time of its own making, and this means that it possesses its own time, independent of the living time of what it portrays. The photograph, by contrast, receives almost instantaneously — usually today at a speed which cannot be perceived by the human eye. The only time contained in a photograph is the isolated instant of what it shows. (AWT, p.95)

In a drawing, time is heterogeneous; more time is spent on those aspects which are considered most important by the artist. As Berger puts it: “Time in a drawing accrues according to human value”. (AWT, p. 95) By contrast, time in a photograph is uniform, cut to a single measure by the guillotine of the shutter. For Berger, this is the crux of the matter:

[U]nlike the story-teller or painter or actor, the photographer only makes, in any one photograph, a single constitutive choice: the choice of the instant to be photographed. (AW, pp. 89-90)

In this respect, his espousal of photo-realism seems to belong less to the Platonic tradition of mimesis than as a close relative to the thoughts expressed by Roland Barthes in Camera Lucida:

The realists, of whom I am one and of whom I was already one when I asserted that the Photograph was an image without
code – even if, obviously, certain codes do inflect our reading of it – the realists do not take the photograph for a ‘copy’ of reality, but for an emanation of past reality: a magic, not an art. To ask whether a photograph is analogical or coded is not a good means of analysis. The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time.3

Like Barthes, Berger derives almost everything about the nature of photography from the camera’s unique relationship to time. Compared with other means of communication, he declares that the photograph, because it offers only the choice of a single instant, is ‘weak in intentionality’. However, he immediately elevates this ‘weakness’ to be photography’s particular strength, insofar as it orients photographic meaning towards the event portrayed. For Berger, the subjectivity of the photographer, the ability to frame images differently, or perform dark room magic, are all of secondary importance in shaping meaning compared to what the image actually shows:

The formal arrangement of a photograph explains nothing. The events are in themselves mysterious or explicable according to the spectator’s knowledge of them prior to his seeing the photograph. (U, p. 179)

This emphasis on the event, or rather, the appearances of the event, underlies Berger’s fundamental distinction between photography and other visual arts such as painting or drawing. In a well-known and characteristically productive formulation, Berger argues that, unlike other media, the camera does not translate from appearances; it quotes them.

The metaphor of quotation is the fulcrum of Berger’s exploration of the ambiguity of photographic meaning and the limits of photographic truth. It functions as a wheel which returns him time and again to the critical importance of context. Unwilling to surrender the unique force of photography by declaring the photograph to be simply another ‘sign’, Berger also refuses to naturalise the image in the manner of an a-historic realism. Instead, he insists that the photograph is a trace born at the intersection of nature and culture; an image which is both a cultural artefact and something like a natural impression. This both/and logic informs his conditional, double-faced, assessment:
The photographic quotation is, within its limits, incontrollable. ... Yet, the quotation, placed like a fact in an implicit or explicit argument, can misinform.

Hence he concludes:

In itself the photograph cannot lie, but, by the same token, it cannot tell the truth; or rather, the truth it can tell, the truth it can by itself defend, is a limited one. (AWT, p. 97)

In this respect, Berger shares Barthes' faith in the power of the photograph to authenticate; to make a single and unquestionable assertion that this has been. Yet, having acknowledged an intractable skin of realism, Berger argues that it is a fundamental mistake to extend this limited capacity into wider claims concerning photographic truth. As soon as you move beyond limited questions of presence and absence into more complex questions of significance, you are dealing with the nature of lived experience. Truth necessarily becomes more complex, something he illustrates with an example I am sure many will recall:

An X-ray photograph of a wounded leg can tell the 'utter truth' about whether the bones are fractured or not. But how does a photograph tell the 'utter truth' about a man's experience of hunger or, for that matter, his experience of a feast? (AWT, p. 98)

A corollary of the camera’s distinctive relationship to time is the degree of discontinuity experienced when we look at a photograph. Habit has led us to internalise this discontinuity — except in special circumstances, such as when the photograph shows an image of someone we once knew who is now dead. The ability of the camera to slice appearances into separate frames which preserve the look of an instant for a life time inevitably disconnects appearances, not simply from the space and time of their existence, but from their webs of significance.

Berger frequently compares photography to memory, initially to underline a contrast between the two. A remembered image, he writes, is the residue of a continuous lived experience; whereas often a photograph is a single instant which arrives in our view from elsewhere. Overcoming discontinuity — providing context for the photographic quotation — is therefore central to the way in which photographs are made meaningful. For Berger:
Meaning is discovered in what connects, and cannot exist without development. Without a story, without an unfolding, there is no meaning. ... An instant photographed can only find meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future. (AWT, p. 89)

In arguing this point, it is important to recognise that Berger is not interested in the restoration of a photograph's 'original' context, but is advocating the creation of a context of experience: a narrative context made through a variety of means which might include text, other images, design and layout. A successful context doesn't work by denying the ambiguity of the photograph and anchoring the image to a prescriptive text in the manner of reportage or photo-journalism, but rather begins from photographic ambiguity as the stock from which a multi-faceted narrative might grow.

This sense in which the discontinuity of the photographic process might constitute a narrative seed as much as a narrative shard marks a fundamental difference between Berger's work and that of Susan Sontag. In On Photography, Sontag also foregrounds the ambiguity of photographs:

> A photograph is only a fragment and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft, abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading.4

Like Berger, Sontag argues that "Only that which narrates can make us understand". (OP, p. 23) However, from there she makes a more dubious leap to conflate the static nature of the photographic image with an inherent inability to narrate. In the end, Sontag offers a deeply pessimistic reading of visual culture, as inherently fragmented, atomised and opportunistic.

In contrast to Sontag's negativity concerning the capacity of the photograph to narrate, Berger asks how things might be made different. He argues that the prevailing sense of fragmentation surrounding contemporary images is not a function of the camera or its technical process per se, but a function of the social relations in which photography developed and is still embedded. Unsurprisingly, the key terms for him here are positivism and capitalism. Berger argues that the dream of positivist utopia – that quantifiable facts would one day offer such total knowledge about
nature and society that rational planning would overcome all misery and
want – has been submerged into the system of global capitalism. In this
system:

all that exists becomes quantifiable – not simply because it can
be reduced to a statistical fact, but also because it has been
reduced to a commodity. (AWT, p. 99)

What lingers from the high point of the positivist episteme in the
nineteenth century is the denial of subjectivity in favour of a spurious
notion of objective truth. As Berger notes, the present social function of
subjectivity has been relegated to the private realm with its only socially
acceptable form being “the individual consumer’s dream”. (AWT, p. 100) He
adds:

The way photography is used today both derives from and
confirms the suppression of the social function of subjectivity.
Photographs, it is said, tell the truth. From this simplification,
which reduces the truth to the instantaneous, it follows that
what a photograph tells us about a door or a volcano belongs
to the same order of truth as what it tells about a man
weeping or a woman’s body. (AWT, p. 100)

Berger argues that the conflation between the limited evidentiary truth
value of photography and its broader use as a means of public communi-
cation is less an oversight than a proposal:

The proposal was (and is) that when something is visible, it is a
fact, and that facts contain the only truth. (AWT, p. 100)

I want to draw out one final point before I turn to Berger’s sketch of an
‘alternative use’ of photography, because it will be important when we try
to fully understand his double sense of the camera’s significance at this
particular juncture in history:

Public photography has remained the child of the hopes of
positivism. Orphaned – because those hopes are now dead – it
has been adopted by the opportunism of corporate capitalism.
It seems likely that the denial of the innate ambiguity of the
photograph is closely connected with the denial of the social
function of subjectivity. (AWT, p. 100)

In his 1978 response to Sontag’s work, Berger first explicitly argued the
The importance of making a distinction between public and private uses of photography. The context is a discussion of the relationship of photography to memory and to meaning. The critical difference he advances is that the private photograph – one which we might have taken ourselves, or which shows people or places with which we are familiar – 'is appreciated and read in a context which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it'. (AL, p. 51) From this vantage point Berger argues, against Sontag, that the photograph can become an instrument of memory rather than its obstruction. When we look at our own photos, it is often an occasion for story-telling. In this context, the photograph is not overburdened by desire for 'information', but forms a touchstone for reminiscence. In contrast, the contemporary public photograph – one which generally shows people or events about which we know little – finds it much harder to contribute to memory; if it does so, "it is to the memory of an unknowable and total stranger". (AL, p. 52)

There are a number of points to make in relation to Berger's distinction between public and private images. The first is that it is not pure. Obviously, private photos can – and often are – used publicly, and their meaning will shift correspondingly. As I argued earlier, Berger is not interested in fixing photographic meaning, but rather of recognising its irreducible ambiguity and utilising it – something he claims is better achieved by inserting photography into radial narratives akin to the functioning of memory, rather than the lineal information flow which characterises most public uses of photography in the present. It is from this perspective that he argues that "the private use of photographs can be exemplary for their public use". (AL, p. 57) (An excellent example of what he means here is the photo-narrative 'If Each Time...' in Another Way of Telling.) This offers one path towards an 'alternative photography' which seeks "to incorporate photography into a social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any such memory". (AL, p. 57)

In fact, Berger suggests several different ways in which photography might be used differently. He argues that a more radical alternative practice demands a rethinking of the social relations between photographer and those photographed. Instead of the journalistic stance, where the photographer sees her or him self as a reporter to the world at large, Berger insists that the emphasis should be placed on working on behalf of those
shown. Again his work with Mohr attempts to put this into practice – their photo-essays are imaginatively constructed from the perspective of the marginalised, evoking the memories of a peasant women, or the desires of migrant workers.

It is worth adding that, while Berger is critical of the voracious appetite of the current media system and its well-known capacity to accommodate almost any image, he does not entirely dismiss the communicative possibilities of mainstream public photography. Alongside his distinction between public and private uses, he also makes a space for what he calls the ‘expressive photograph’. This is a photograph which expands the ‘length’ of its quotation from appearances by presenting them in such a way as to extend the event beyond itself. Again, the crucial question is context: in the expressive photograph, the image is able to create its own context from within, enabling another kind of meaning to form. In the expressive photograph, particular appearances become the basis for the articulation of a more general idea. (AWT, pp. 119-122)

What makes Berger’s work more complex and thought-provoking than a conventional ‘realism’ is that he relates the emancipatory potential of the photograph to historical changes in the meaning of appearances themselves. In positing the photograph as inherently oriented towards the events it portrays, Berger is equally making an argument about the revelatory nature of appearances. He contends:

> All cultures previous to our own treated appearances as signs addressed to the living. All was legend: all was there to be read by the eye. (AWT, p. 115)

Modern science and philosophy have overthrown the basis for such explanations, reducing appearances to “contingency whose meaning is purely personal”. (AWT, p. 115) Yet, Berger insists that it was a rationalist misconception to believe that the death of God would also eliminate all sense of mystery. He argues:

> In every act of looking there is an expectation of meaning. This expectation should be distinguished from a desire for explanation. The one who looks may explain afterwards; but, prior to any explanation, there is the expectation of what appearances themselves may be about to reveal. (AWT, p. 117)

This revelatory potential is connected to the capacity of appearances to
generate ideas by articulating "a set of correspondences which provoke in the viewer a recognition of some past experience". (AWT, p. 122) Given Berger's definition of photography as a means of quoting from appearances, this formulation situates the historic import Berger attributes to the invention of the camera:

The half-language of appearances continually arouses an expectation of further meaning. We seek revelation with our eyes. In life this expectation is rarely met. Photography confirms this expectation and confirms it in a way which can be shared ... In the expressive photograph, appearances cease to be oracular and become elucidatory. ... When this happens we suddenly find ourselves at home amongst appearances; as we are at home in our mother tongue. (AWT, p. 129)

It is at this point that I want to recall Kracauer's description of photography as the "go-for-broke game of history". Kracauer's argument is complex and I will have to take a risk in summarising it very briefly. Basically he contends that the historical significance of the camera lies in the fact that the proliferation of images under capitalism offers a 'warehouse' of natural appearances at a moment when human relationships to nature are profoundly changing:

The warehousing of nature promotes the confrontation of consciousness with nature. Just as consciousness finds itself confronting the unabashedly displayed mechanics of industrial society, it also faces, thanks to photographic technology, the reflection of the reality that has slipped away from it. (P, p. 62)

The reality reflected by what Kracauer calls the photographic 'blizzard' is chaotic and fragmented. It is a ghost-like reality which remains 'unredeemed'. (P, p. 56) The critical point is that Kracauer argues that redemption might be found precisely through the process of photographic fragmentation, because it "betrays an indifference towards what things mean". (P, p. 58). The underlying argument is that human liberation from historic constraints demands a radical change in consciousness, including the pulling apart of the natural world so that new social relationships might be built. Insofar as the frenzied photographic blizzard offers a configuration which is so arbitrary, Kracauer argues "one could just as well imagine a different organisation of those elements". (P, p. 56) Writing in 1927, Kracauer posed the issue in terms of an historical fork. If capitalism
were to endure, "the nature that [photography] had failed to penetrate would sit down at the very table consciousness had abandoned". (P. p. 61).
In other words, the fragmented and fluid image world would displace the coherence of natural appearances, presaging the consolidation of commodity culture, and what Debord later called the society of the spectacle, in which images themselves became the ultimate commodity. However, if capitalism were overthrown, "then liberated consciousness would be given an incomparable opportunity. Less enmeshed in natural bonds than ever before, it could prove its power in dealing with them. The turn to photography is the go-for-broke game of history". (P. p. 61)

It is no secret which prong of this historical fork we remain stuck on today. And this difference in historical circumstances is perhaps one reason for the rather more modest claim that Berger makes for the role of the photograph in the present. Where Kracauer saw it as a revolutionary lever capable of redeeming human relations to the natural life world, Berger sees it more as a shelter in hostile times.

In Berger's account, the central factor underlying the loss in the coherence of appearances in modernity is the changing social relations of time under capitalism. The social value of the timeless or the eternal has been subsumed by the remorseless forces of history encapsulated in the pervasive notion of Progress. For Berger, this conflation of time and history is profoundly violent. It creates a society in which the experience of timelessness - which he sees as a universal aspect of human existence - can no longer be readily shared:

Experiences which prompt the term forever have now to be assumed alone and privately. Their role has been changed; instead of transcending they isolate. ... The period in which photography has developed corresponds to the period in which this uniquely modern anguish has become commonplace (AWT, p. 108)

This situates the full theoretical and existential import of the private photograph, or rather, the private use of photography, in the present. Even flimsy and faded, it functions as a quotidian symbol of human resistance to the violent conflation of time and history:

In this case, ... ingenuity uses whatever there is at hand, to preserve experience, to recreate an area of 'timelessness', to
insist upon the permanent. And so, hundreds of millions of photographs, fragile images, often carried next to the heart or placed by the side of the bed, are used to refer to that which historical time has no right to destroy. (AWT, p. 108)
