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John Berger Image, Photography, Criticism: Compassion and/or Politics



“The image pinched. In it there is a compassion that refutes indifference and is irreconcilable with an easy hope. To what an extraordinary moment this painting belongs in the history of human representation and awareness! ...Like Antigone’s, the lucid compassion of this portrait coexists with its powerlessness. And those two qualities, far from being contradictory, affirm one another in a way that victims can acknowledge but only the heart can recognise...

...to identify with a stranger to the point of fully recognising her or him, is to defy necessity, and in this defiance, even if small and quiet and even if measuring only 60cm x 50cm., there is a power which cannot be measured by the limits of the natural order. *It is not a means and it has no end...*”
John Berger: The Shape of the Pocket 2001 178-179 (my emphasis)



This image here comes from a documentary film made in 1996 and taken from that film by and referred to by Stephen Muecke in discussing how we can ever understand our socio-physical /centeredness. Berger had been on a walk with his documentary maker¹ and was demonstrating the sense of ‘centre’ in Haute Savoie in the French Alps.

“...There's a vertical line and there's a horizontal line. Along those two lines [and here Berger makes a cross with his fingers to illustrate] come the following, I mean, the horizontal line is all the roads leading out from the village, from that centre, across to other places and finally to all the world. It's the way you get to that home on the surface of the earth. And then there is the vertical line and that is where the dead, and maybe the unborn, go up and down, between earth and heaven. Ah, and when they cross, like that [he makes a cross with his fingers again] that is a place which is really home.... When you live in a situation like that, ah, the question of answering, why are we here? The question of finding sense is much easier to answer. But in how many places of the world is that now true? In fact very few.”²

Also within this documentary Berger states

“I don't think that anybody can reasonably *claim* compassion. Because I think that when compassion occurs it's a kind of miracle. And it only comes by a kind of grace.”³

¹ Jansen, John Albert (ed.) (1996) 'John Berger: A Kind of Grace', programme produced by Manja Wilkinson, © Humanistische Omroep Stichting.

² Berger J,(1996) in “A Kind of Grace” op.cit cited by Stephen Muecke (2001) Being Centred, Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts, 6:3, 15-22

³ Berger J, (1996) “A Kind of Grace” op.cit cited by Stephen Muecke (2001) Being Centred, Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts, 6:3, 15-22

I am citing this image of Berger's fingers making a cross and its context because in his explanation of the power of the image from Gericault to generate compassion, Berger uses his fingers again. He talks of the image as 'pinching' and he elucidates exactly how, in his writing, as if he is showing us with his fingers:

"It pinched us between two fingers. I will try to explain the first finger."⁴

That Berger wants his pinch to be between fingers is unusual, given that the easiest form of pinch is between finger and thumb? Has Berger just got it wrong, or is this precisely to involve two hands or a particular form of attention?

For Berger the first finger making up the pinch is what I might state as the current (he first wrote this in 1991) normality of madness. For Berger, and I somewhat crudely summarise, madness is the gap between a certain suffering and any adequate explanation for it.

Moreover, this is made manifest. In the Gericault portraits from the 'madhouse' characteristically "the sitters' eyes are looking elsewhere, askance". Berger comments:

"How often today can one encounter a not dissimilar glance refusing to focus on the near-...There are historical periods when madness appears to be what it is: a rare and abnormal affliction. There are other periods-like the one we have just entered-when madness appears to be typical."⁵

So one finger presents "today...a not dissimilar glance refusing to focus on the near". Whilst Berger boldly yet precisely states that the second finger in this pinch "comes from the compassion of the image." Bold as I think Berger considers compassion a relatively rare phenomenon and in contrast Berger has himself written of the disabling effects of certain types of images of suffering. In his essay "Photographs of Agony" he is clear about the problem of such photographs.

"As we look at them, the moment of the other's suffering engulfs. We are filled with either despair or indignation...the assumption of our lives appears to be a hopelessly inadequate response to what we have just seen."⁶

So I have two inter-related questions: What is the difference in this image here? Is it any good to have compassion, as some thinkers would say "no" to such emotion?⁷

I maintain that for Berger compassion is something very distinctive, discrete...that it involves a certain leap and act of 'faith' outside of 'normal' boundaries of space and time and yet it touches in a strangely rooted and material sense, but he is not naïve about it, especially not politically naïve about how compassion gets enmeshed in other 'causes' to maintain the status quo or that it can be 'artful'; that it can have perhaps just a 'weak' power to socially engage bordering upon or some might say actually enlisting de-politicisation.

We might expect Berger to be amongst those highly critical of compassion as a political force, yet in reference to the scene with the poster displaying the Gericault he seems to invoke it very precisely.

⁴ Berger J: (2001) *The Shape of the Pocket* London Bloomsbury

⁵ Berger 2001 op.cit

⁶ Berger, J (2003) *Photographs of Agony* in Berger *Understanding a Photograph* Penguin Books pp. 30-34

⁷ I have been significantly stimulated to explore these questions by the discussions of the "Compassion Reading Group" at the University of Portsmouth convened by Dermot Feenan, Research Fellow in the School of Law

In a hugely useful article from the British Journal of Political Science of all places, James Johnson carefully traces what is 'wrong' with compassion as a factor which keeps cropping up in discourses concerning 'the image' and politics; and here particularly Johnson discusses documentary photography. I am of course aware that in my example from Berger, the image that elicits compassion is a poster of a painting and that is not lost in my argument and I take that up later.

Johnson article is entitled 'The Arithmetic of Compassion'.⁸ He draws in the first instance upon a poem by Zbigniew Herbert called "Mr Cogito reads the newspaper": his argument hanging upon the lines in the poem

"...for 120 dead/you search on a map in vain/too great a distance/covers them like jungle".⁹

Johnson brings together Herbert's observation of the disabling effects of numbers and distance with Hannah Arendt's incisive observations that precisely because compassion depends upon a particular and deep empathetic engagement with the suffering of another *individual* it is both irrelevant for the necessarily wider field of political activism and action. What is more, if compassion is attempted as applying to a larger number; a wider field of suffering, it is, according the Arendt, most vulnerable to lapsing into pity, which is an anathema to political solidarity and engagement for changing those dire circumstances. Compassion is at best *inarticulate*; at worst *asymmetrical* and depends upon the maintenance of those very structures of hierarchy and distance that elicit it.

So why is Berger acknowledging something that by these arguments is so disabling, indeed so antithetical to emancipatory politics?

Has he fallen for the rational rehabilitation of compassion from the thinking of Martha Nussbaum for example? She argues for an articulate and rational compassion based upon, and here I very crudely summarise, the place of compassion in the interests of each and every one and all of us within a liberal democracy, necessary in maintaining a sense of the necessities for human flourishing, which is ultimately for '*my own*' aspirations also?

Is Berger 'entrapped' by compassion in the way that Johnson argues happens to Susan Sontag as a highly articulate critical commentator upon photography, audience response and politics?

Sontag, as Johnson shows, is entrapped in so far as she is aware of the limitations of compassion but nevertheless suggests *that is all* the photographs of suffering may engender and is indeed sceptical of any attempts to transcend that individualisation and personhood upon which compassion relies.

Two quotes from Sontag included by Johnson show this:

"Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated..."¹⁰

Whilst also from Sontag discussing the work of Sebastiao Salgado to which I shall in part return...

"Salgado's migration pictures group together under a single heading, a host of different causes and kinds of distress. Making suffering loom larger, by globalizing it, may spur people to think they ought to 'care' more. It also invites them to feel that the sufferings and misfortunes are too vast, too

⁸ Johnson, J The Arithmetic of Compassion-rethinking the politics of photography British Journal of Political Science / Volume 41 / Issue 03 / July 2011, pp 621 - 643

⁹ Quoted in Johnson op.cit

¹⁰ Quoted in Johnson op.cit

irrevocable and too epic to be changed by any local political intervention. With a subject conceived on this scale, compassion can only flounder..."¹¹

Sontag answers her own argument that images that evoke compassion are self-defeating which then brings me back to why it is important for Berger to not only use the word *but meditate upon it here*.

In the short piece he calls upon the philosopher Simone Weil comparing compassion to a certain 'creative attention' which we might comment, at the very least here brings in the activity of the viewer;

"Love for our neighbour, being made of creative attention, is analogous to genius". She refers to "being able to say to him: What are you going through?", and that "the sufferer exists... as a man, exactly like we are, who was one day stamped with a special mark of affliction. For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable to know how to look at him in a certain way". (My emphasis)¹²

And as alluded to already, he calls upon the story of Antigone, precisely because here that which calls for compassion *is transcendent* but also in the very heart of its manifestation it is strangely entirely concrete and is historical:

"To what an extraordinary moment this painting belongs in the history of human representation and awareness! Before it, no stranger would have looked so hard and with such pity at a lunatic. A little later and no painter would have painted such a portrait without exhorting a glimmer of a modern or romantic hope...*Compassion has no place in the natural order of the world...compassion opposes this order and is therefore best thought of a being supernatural...[it] is to defy necessity...*"¹³

What can this mean about Berger's understanding of compassion?

I want to follow some lines of enquiry which touch upon Walter Benjamin, and also to take up something of Sebastiao Salgado himself, contra to Sontag's reading and given that Berger has engaged sympathetically with his work, and perhaps especially as Salgado in conversation with Berger has himself said "If the person looking at my pictures only feels compassion, I will believe that I have failed completely."¹⁴

Johnson in the essay that has so much informed this one, turns to the work of Salgado to present a contra argument and 'frame' of reference to that formed by the 'entrapment of compassion'. For Johnson, with reference to Salgado's Migration series that Sontag's critiques, Salgado avoids the response of compassion because he does not over emphasise the *individual* plight of his subjects. He presents his work with deliberation to be both disparate and distinct in its recording of people in spaces and places but with a sense of proximity as if "in series accruing effect from their proximity to one another". He is careful to shift back and forth between individuals and groups of varying sorts and sizes and populated landscapes, people as back drops for people rather than landscapes as back drops for people in an 'artful' way. For Johnson Salgado's works at times seem to 'burst' with their confined 'largeness' as almost 'entire populations' appear in conditions of displacement and dislocation, producing quasi disorientation for the viewer; a disorientation further marked by the inherent reflexivity of photography.

This latter is an important point for Johnson in that in the looking at a photograph we somehow at the same time 'imagine our own actual looking' which we may find sometimes pleasurable or

¹¹ Quoted in Johnson op. cit

¹² Berger J *The Shape of the Pocket* op.cit

¹³ Berger *Shape of...* op cit

¹⁴ Berger *A tragedy as big as the planet* in Berger *Understanding a Photograph* op.cit

disturbing. Berger himself notes “Photography is the process of rendering observation self-conscious”.¹⁵

I’ll return to this in part. But to continue with Johnson in sum, the disturbance and disorientation we feel is ours, which is drawn into the patterns and resemblances rather than repetitions across ‘multitudes’. In moving away from suffering individuals, whilst they are sometimes there within and amongst the many, as Johnson argues, they direct us to something other than compassion; they direct us to a sense of solidarity.

Importantly solidarity avoids the collapse of the ‘political space’ into compassion as the “demand” to embrace the pain on another or its worse bedfellow ‘pity’. We can, going back to Hannah Arendt, “establish deliberately and as it were, dispassionately a community of interest with the exploited and the oppressed.”¹⁶ Solidarity whilst it can be detached in the way that pity can, is far more of a provocation for rectifying suffering and an inspiration for action, rather than being strangely dependent upon suffering as ‘pity’ is. In his “aggregations” of suffering and displacement, Salgado “challenges” compassion to be solidarity.

Not all agree, including T.J Clark, a politicised art historian if ever there was one, who still sees Salgado’s works, let us not be dismissive, hugely important, but focussing upon the ‘hardship’ somewhat more than the *struggle to challenge* such hardship...¹⁷

So why does John Berger ‘persist’ with compassion? It goes back to the hand and fingers. Berger has a ‘sensate’ bodied’ response whereby he can delineate the core/fulcrum of the depth and breadth of a changing rural community the crossing of his two fingers and he is not afraid to say that an image pinched; that he was in that sense ‘forcibly’ touched by a visual image. Is that a collapse of politics or an alternative way?

Berger is with Walter Benjamin I think in linking tactile and other bodily sensations with *memory*. It is part of a very particular approach to thinking by way of a sense of *experience*. Both Berger and Benjamin are very clear about the relationship between memory and meaning and shall I say meaningfulness; the imprint of meaning which provokes thought and I might hesitantly say, the beginnings of action to ‘redeem’ suffering. This is not to say that memory is continuous and easily narrated, indeed it is more of a ‘spark’ or ‘flash’ that disturbs the flow history but it is also an imprint, like the mark of a finger. Benjamin in his “Small History of Photography” refers to photography as invoking the optical unconscious due to its power to open up hitherto unseen and indeed unforeseen sights and hence sites of knowledge.

For Benjamin photography in one instant can give you *both* the arrested moment *and* the need to search for the history of that moment to inform the future “to find the inconspicuous spot wherein the immediacy of that long forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that, we, looking back, may rediscover it”.¹⁸

To recall Berger on his encounter with the poster it is as if an image *defied time and place and a certain linearity of history* to present another history for us which finds its place in another kind of narration or connection. Benjamin’s is a hugely compressed but actually *a political statement* about ‘redeeming’ that which is past (which includes any photograph as it is always already a past

¹⁵ Quoted in Johnson, Arithmetic op.cit

¹⁶ Quoted in Johnson Arithmetic op.cit

¹⁷ See Clark, T.J.; ‘Responses’ in *Migrations; The Work of Sebastiao Salgado* Doreen B Townsend Occasional Papers 26 Doreen B Townsend Center for the Humanities USA California University of Berkley 2002

¹⁸ Benjamin, Walter A small history of Photography in *One Way Street* New Left Books 1979

moment) and reflecting upon its 'origins' and its relationship to 'its' future which is 'ours' in looking at it, but is theirs in 'being' for it. For me Benjamin develops an entire thesis of history as necessitating the redemption of the past and a hope for the hopeless through this constellation of the past 'flashing' through the present to disturb a linear future.

John Berger echoes this profoundly I think in his essay on "The Uses of Photography". ... "if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would reacquire a living context. They would continue to exist in time (Benjamin's point where he politicises time as a 'flash' interrupting the linear time of history) instead of being (in Benjamin's sense again *only*) arrested moments"¹⁹

Berger goes on and here echoing Benjamin's "Author as Producer"²⁰, 1) that the photographer think of her-himself not so much as a reporter to the rest of the world, but rather as a recorder for those involved in the events photographed...the distinction is crucial...*images addressed to those suffering what they depict*" 2) that the photograph be in put in a context of social experience that 'respects' the 'laws' of memory which actually confound and cross linear time; permitting the experience of 'Now' – as a 'was' and 'is' and an afterwards-

That's kind of our job as well-perhaps- to re-cognise a politics *in* compassion. It seems to me that Berger often returns to this. "To look at a person with recognition and attention...recognition-the word appears to make no claim and to sound poor. Yet that perhaps is how it should be."²¹

In "The Story teller" Benjamin describes the transmission of experience and wisdom, thus:

It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the Story teller cling to the story the way the handprint of the potter clings to the clay vessel.²²

For Berger...A pinch between two fingers; a crossing point of the place of action and "traction' of the before and after...

¹⁹ Berger in *Understanding a Photograph* op.cit

²⁰ Benjamin The Author as Producer in *One way Street* op.cit

²¹ Berger Recognition Moyra Peraita Nearly Invisible in *Understanding a Photograph* op. cit

²² 'Benjamin W The storyteller', in *Illuminations*, Fontana, 1992