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Abstract:

In this paper I will compare “Country Doctor” published by Eugene Smith in LIFE magazine in 1948 and *A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor* published by Jean Mohr and John Berger in 1967. In this comparison, I will focus on the relationship between text and image. Whereas Eugene Smith’s photographs depend on text to provide a discursive context for the images, Berger and Mohr generate meaning through a complex interplay between photography and language that defies the traditional function of both media. I will come to this conclusion by analysing both works and by situating them in the more general theoretical framework of the relationship between photography and language.

Two Country Doctors: Between Photography and Language

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In 1948, LIFE magazine published “Country Doctor”, a series of photographs by Eugene Smith, showing the the daily life of Dr. Arnest Ceriani. The photographs are accompanied by text, but it is the particular way in which the photographs themselves are composed and arranged that would turn Smith into ‘the master of the photographic essay’. Twenty years later, writer John Berger and photographer Jean Mohr created *A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor*, in which they follow Dr. John Sassal’s daily routine. Both publications have the same subject: the life of a country doctor. However, their singular approaches give rise to two completely different works. This is mostly due to the respective relationships between words and images.

This paper attempts to explore these relationships as well as their impact on the meaning production of both works. In this exploration, I will mostly resort to the writings of John Berger. I will do this in three parts: the first part consists of an analysis of Eugene Smith’s publication in the light of Berger’s writings on the ambiguity of the photograph. In the second part, I will argue that Berger’s *Another Way of Telling* can be regarded as a post-modernist answer to Smith’s formalist approach. Thirdly and lastly, I will describe *A Fortunate Man* as an expression of the paradoxical relationship between photography and language, placing it between the two previous works.

I. Eugene W. Smith's "Country Doctor"

The article in LIFE magazine opens with a photograph of a man in a suit, walking through a field, carrying a briefcase. By looking at the photograph alone, we do not know who this man is, where he is going, or what his profession is. The title "Country Doctor" suggests that he is a doctor, but we have to read the caption in order to acquire the information we are looking for: "Through weeds growing rank in an unkempt dooryard, Dr. Arnest Ceriani of Kremmling makes his way to call on a patient."¹ If we continue reading the paragraphs below the image we even learn more about his daily routines, the paucity of his salary and his geographical location.

When Eugene Smith took these images, his intention was to represent the life of Dr. Arnest Ceriani. However, we would not know this if it was not for the text accompanying the photographs. According to John Berger, this is due to the 'ambiguity of photographs'. The camera isolates an instant from the flow of appearances. It detaches it from its context and thereby creates a discontinuity between the moment the photograph was taken and the present moment of looking. Because of the ambiguity that is produced by this abyss, photographs are unable to convey meaning: "Photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning. They offer appearances prised away from their meaning." Unlike paintings or drawings, "photographs do not narrate."² They are a direct reflection of light and as such they are an immediate and unconstructed trace. They are what Roland Barthes called 'messages without a code.'³ Berger uses the example of a photograph of men in uniforms holding books to illustrate how photographs depend on words to generate meaning. About this photograph he says: "It requires a caption for us to understand the significance of the event. 'Nazis Burning Books'." Not unlike Walter Benjamin, Berger argues that captions are essential in the meaning production of photographs. As soon as words are added, the ambiguity of a photograph vanishes. "They [words and images] produce together an effect of certainty, even of dogmatic assertion."⁴ The

¹ Smith, "Country Doctor."

² Berger, "Uses of photography." 52

³ Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image." 35

⁴ Berger, "Appearances." 66

text enables us to contextualize the photographs. The anonymous man in the picture suddenly becomes a hard working doctor named Arnest Ceriani who is on his way to a patient.

This specific relationship between words and images can be situated in a modernist tendency to separately define both media according to their purity or essence. They are able to produce meaning when they are combined, but this is only because the visual and the verbal have their own function, specific to their form. Photographs do not narrate; neither does text produce images. In this sense, Berger's conception echoes John Szarkowski's claim that "photography has never been successful at narrative. It has in fact seldom attempted it."⁵ The photo-reportage, of which *A Country Doctor* is an example, clearly presupposes this formalist distinction between text and image. This is also expressed in the clear division of labour between photographer and writer.⁶

However, even though Berger describes this relationship between photography and language as "very powerful," he also finds it very limiting. This is due to the way in which text imposes a meaning on the images. Words provide a photograph with meaning by reducing the ambiguity of the photograph and by narrowing down all of its possible associations to one single interpretation. Instead of considering the ambiguity of the photograph as meaningless, waiting for words to receive meaning, it can also be regarded as an abundance of meaning. Photographs might become even more expressive when their photographic ambiguity is accepted and recognized as such. Embracing the ambiguity of the photograph, Berger suggests, could lead to 'another way of telling.'⁷

II. Another Way of Telling

In opposition to what I have called the formalist or modernist approach, in which images need text in order to produce meaning, Berger also proposes another relationship between images and language, one in which photographs produce meaning autonomously through their "photographic narrative form." Unlike the modernist approach, which is a "denial of the innate ambiguity of the photograph,"⁸ this 'other way of telling' draws on the ambiguity of the photograph.

⁵ Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*

⁶ W. Eugene Smith had almost no say in the process of arranging his photographs and in writing the text, which caused several conflicts between the photographer and LIFE's editorial staff. Cf Willumson, *W. Eugene Smith and the photographic essay*.

⁷ Berger, "Appearances." 66

⁸ Berger, "Appearances." 73

According to Berger, photographs “quote appearances.”⁹ In doing so, however, photographs simplify them by only quoting an instant. Yet, meaning is not instantaneous, Berger continues: “Meaning is discovered in what connects, and cannot exist without development. Without a story, without an unfolding, there is no meaning.”¹⁰ This is why most photographs need words that provide them with a context or a story, to overcome the meaningless ambiguity that results from only quoting an instant. However, some photographs quote differently; they “quote at length.” The length of the quotation is not related to exposure time, but rather to the quantity of other events or associations that are implicated in the photograph. Some photographs are made in such a way that they extend the quoted instant and articulate a set of correspondences. Instead of simply referring to a particular moment in the past, these photographs are able to produce a general idea: “they urge the event to go beyond itself and to represent the generalization carried within the idea.”¹¹ Berger gives the example of a photograph by André Kertész of a young man who has fallen asleep on a table, surrounded by newspapers. The photograph carries the viewer beyond this particular man, making them ponder on sleep in general. By doing so, the photograph becomes legible in itself. The viewer no longer has to rely on a caption, neither does he have to know the persons in the photograph to be able to ‘read’ it. The ambiguity of the photograph, in all its generality, gave rise to another kind of expressiveness.

This legibility, as well as the ability of a single photograph to instigate an idea, also imply the possibility of communicating with groups or sequences of photographs, which, according to Berger, releases the “narrative form intrinsic to still photography.”¹² Together with photographer Jean Mohr, Berger created *Another Way of Telling* (1982), a photo story representing a peasant woman’s life. Not only are all of the selected photographs ‘long quotes’ that ‘instigate an idea,’ the way in which these photographs are arranged enables them to narrate stories by themselves. This ability originates in the use of montage. Unlike the linearity of film, a montage of still photographs has no direction. Instead, the sequence becomes a ‘field of coexistence.’

whereas Eugene W. Smith’s photographs for LIFE depended on text in order to overcome their ambiguity and to provide meaning, *Another Way of Telling* is freed from the constraints of language as the images themselves are able to tell a story. *Another Way of Telling*

⁹ Berger, “Appearances.” 91

¹⁰ Berger, “Appearances.” 64

¹¹ Berger, “Appearances.” 93

¹² Berger, “Appearances.” 100

refuses added text. To add words “would be to impose a single verbal meaning upon appearances and thus to inhibit or deny their own language.”¹³ The idea that photographs can function as language becomes central in post-modern thought.

In his article ‘seeing sense’, Victor Burgin rejects the possibility of a purely visual medium. The visual, he claims, is irrevocably invaded by the verbal. “Photographs predominantly tend to prompt a complex of exchanges between the visual and verbal registers: (...), the greater part of photographic practice is, de facto, ‘scripto-visual’.”¹⁴ Berger and Mohr’s *Another Way of Telling* draws on, and presupposes, this scripto-visual potential of photographs. The viewer (or should we say reader?) relates the images to each other and immediately invests his/her perception with knowledge, connotations and discursive consciousness. In this context, the idea of a photograph as a mere indexical trace or a copy of reality, no longer makes sense.¹⁵

We have now established an opposition between Eugene Smith’s ‘Story of a Country Doctor’ and Berger and Mohr’s *Another Way of Telling* with regard to their respective takes on the relationship between image and language. Whereas Smith’s reportage presupposes a radical difference between both media in form and function, Berger and Mohr reveal the discursive potential of their photographs by giving them a linguistic function. In *The Spoken Image: Photography and Language*, Clive Scott uses the same opposition in an analogical way to analyse Berger and Mohr’s evolution from *A Fortunate Man*, a previous photo essay published in 1987, to *Another Way of Telling*. According to Scott, the images in *A Fortunate Man* are nothing but “evidential illustration” that need text in order to make sense.¹⁶ The meaningless ambiguity of the images needs to be supplemented with discursive text to produce meaning. In other words, Scott applies to *A Fortunate Man* the modernist or formalist reading that we used above to analyse Smith’s “Country Doctor”. In what follows, I will argue, in contrary to Scott, that *A Fortunate Man* can be situated between Smith’s photo reportage in LIFE and *Another Way of Telling*, with regard to its conception of the relationship between photographs and text.

¹³ Berger, “Appearances.” 133

¹⁴ Burgin, “Seeing Sense.” 58

¹⁵ According to Burgin, the modernist belief in a radical difference between word and image and the search for a purely visual or verbal medium is rooted in Neoplatonism. Plato posited a strict hierarchy between the visual world of ideas and the imperfect discursive copy thereof in our world. Burgin, “Seeing Sense.” 70

¹⁶ Scott, *Spoken Image*. 251

III. *A Fortunate Man*

A Fortunate Man opens with a photograph of a landscape superimposed with the following lines: “Landscapes can be deceptive. Sometimes a landscape seems to be less a setting for a life of its inhabitants than a curtain behind which their struggles, achievements and accidents take place.” The image and the text have the same subject, namely landscape(s). It is not clear, however, whether the text is referring to the exact landscape that is depicted in the photograph. In Smith’s “Country Doctor”, the reader clearly associates the images with the text. There is no doubt that the man in the photograph is Dr. Arnest Ceriani mentioned in the caption. In *A Fortunate Man*, on the other hand, we could very well imagine that Berger had not seen Mohr’s photograph when he wrote these lines. The function of the text is not to impose a certain meaning on the photograph in order to restrict its meaningless ambiguity. Unlike “Country Doctor”, *A Fortunate Man* generates a complex interplay between image and text. The words infiltrate the viewer’s perception of the photograph and vice versa, they mutually determine each other and the respective function of word and image flow into each other. The interplay between these media, challenging each other’s function and definition, already undermines Scott’s reduction of *A Fortunate Man* to images that require text in order to be understood. This conception approaches *Another Way of Telling* in the sense that, instead of radically separating the visual from the discursive, it allows the photographs to be read and the text to be seen.

Meanwhile, there are also indications that accommodate a modernist reading of *A Fortunate Man*; The strict division of labour, for example. Mohr took photographs as a photographer, while Berger wrote as a writer. In the introduction to the book, Berger describes how they worked in complete isolation from one another, as two artists using their own medium to express themselves.

However, soon thereafter, when they started bringing their work together, Berger found they were mirroring each other. “They [photographs and text] were tautologous – as if my text was a series of captions to his images (...), so we reworked it so that the words and pictures were like a conversation; building on (...) one another.”¹⁷ This quotation effectively shows how Berger and Mohr oscillate between a formalist approach and a post-modern one. They started writing and photographing independently, respecting the different characteristics of each medium. During the process, however, they shifted towards adapting their creations to

¹⁷ Berger, *A Fortunate Man*. 11

each other. They started a “conversation” with one another, which presupposes that they speak the same language or at least are able to communicate in some way.

Throughout the book, words and images continuously alternate between these two modes of collaboration. Sometimes they are developed separately from one another. For instance, when Mohr shows a series of portraits, the reader ignores who the portrayed people are. They appreciate these images on a purely visual level. At other points, the photographs clearly start a dialogue with the text, as if they were providing a commentary or an answer to its questions. Occasionally, they may also just start telling a story by themselves, leaving their purely pictorial function behind in order to invade the terrain of the text. As such, the photographs are no longer ‘messages without a code,’ but draw on their discursive potential to provide meaning and tell a story at the same time. However, for all these instances in which photography starts producing meaning in an autonomous way, there are just as many moments where the images return to their original function of illustrating the text.

In his book *Picture Theory*, W. J. T. Mitchell describes a similar tension between image and text in the photographic essay in general. According to Mitchell, the photographic essay holds the middle between a formalist separation between two modes of communication and a free exchange of these modes. He argues that the photographic essay consists of a complex oscillation between ‘mutual resistance’ and ‘collaboration’ and places it at the crossroad between modernism and post-modernism.¹⁸¹⁹

I will not go so far as to draw conclusions with regard to the essence of the photographic essay in general. I simply want to apply the dialectic between modernism and post-modernism as described by Mitchell to the three works discussed in this paper. Whereas Eugene Smith’s *Country Doctor* insisted on the distinctive character of each medium, in the sense that photography is not a language and vice versa, *Another Way of Telling* turned this around and considered photography as a language in its own right. *A Fortunate Man*, then, holds the middle between these positions, in the sense that photography is used both in a strictly visual way and

¹⁸ Mitchell, “The Photographic Essay.” 322

¹⁹ With regard to the opposition between a formalist and a post-modernist relationship of photography and language, this paper’s emphasis differs slightly from Mitchell’s. Whereas Mitchell considers the fact that the photo essay is rooted in “documentary journalism, newspapers, magazines, and the whole ensemble of visual-verbal interactions in mass media” as a sign of its post-modern dimension, I consider it as a confirmation of a formalist tendency. In magazines and traditional documentary journalism, text and images are indeed used at the same time and on the same page, but they do not leave their respective domains. Photographs are used in a strictly visual way and language in a strictly verbal. I characterize the post-modern exchange between photography and language not so much as the use of both media at the same time, but as a mutual contamination of verbal and visual registers.

as a language. To the question “what is the relationship between photography and language?”, Mitchell replies: “Photography is and is not a language; language also is and is not a ‘photography’.”²⁰ He goes back to what Roland Barthes called “the photographic paradox,”²¹ the fact that a photograph is at the same time a message without a code and something that can be read or deciphered. Berger seems to occupy a similar paradoxical position in his writing on photography. How else could one make sense of Berger’s text *Appearances*, in which he claims that “Photography, unlike drawing, does not possess a language” and at the same time searches for “a narrative form intrinsic to still photography”²²? Photography appears in Berger’s writing as a deeply paradoxical medium: “Are the appearances which a camera transports, a construction, a man-made cultural artefact, or are they like a footprint in the sand, a trace *naturally* left by something that has passed? The answer is both.”²³ A photograph is an index as much as it is an icon; trace and construction, nature and culture; denotation and connotation. Photography’s paradoxical nature is best expressed in *A Fortunate Man*, where it oscillates between both poles: a purely visual trace that needs words to provide meaning and an autonomous discursive mode of communication that is able to narrate through images.

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²⁰ Mitchell, “The Photographic Essay.” 281

²¹ Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image.” 20

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