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GEOFF DYER'S WAYS OF SEEING

ABSTRACT: In this paper I will try to show how photography informs Geoff Dyer's novel and essay writing, not only by affecting its contents, but mainly by playing a part in the structures and modes of his works, both on the narrative and non-narrative level. Taking the lead from Dyer's early essay on John Berger, *Ways of Telling* (1986), I will try to show in what way Berger's photographic theory shapes Dyer's most famous novels, *The Colour of Memory* (1989) and *But Beautiful* (1991). I will then first follow the steps Dyer trod in perfecting his knowledge of photography up to his producing a substantial and innovative work on the history and criticism of American photography, *The Ongoing Moment* (2005); then show how, in one of his most recent works, *White Sands* (2016), he managed to create a form of essay in which his foremost passions, photography and jazz, become an essential feature of the text, just like he did in *But Beautiful*, yet, this time, without relying on themes and contents.

KEYWORDS: Geoff Dyer, Photography, Fiction, Essay Writing, Jazz.

Geoff Dyer's first book is a volume on John Berger, titled *Ways of Telling*, which appeared in 1986. Three years later Dyer published his first novel, *The Colour of Memory*, where it is not difficult to detect the influence of Berger's approach to the visual arts, and especially to photography. This "way of seeing" will characterize Dyer's work up to the present day, being at the basis of what I would call Dyer's 'photographic writing'.

In his 1982 essay "Appearances", reprinted in 2013 in the collection *Understanding a Photograph*, John Berger affirms that the ambiguity of a photograph resides in the discontinuity "between the moment recorded and the moment of looking" (64). All photos are ambiguous because "they have been taken out of a continuity. If the event is a public event, this continuity is history; if it is personal, the continuity, which has been broken, is a life story. Even a pure landscape breaks a continuity: that of light and the weather" (65).

In his debut novel, Geoff Dyer depicts a series of moments in the life of a group of young people who are on social benefits living in Brixton at the end of the Eighties. Each chapter is like a snapshot that breaks the continuity of their life stories, instead of contributing to the creation of a homogeneous and well-structured fiction. Not by chance, at the end of chapter 01—which curiously is the last, and not the first—the narrator finds an old photo where

all the main characters, with whom he is no longer in touch, are still happy together in Brixton. In light of this, the whole novel appears as an impossible attempt to fill the gap between the moment when that photo was taken and the moment when he sees it.

Each chapter is like a photograph that, according to Berger, “isolates the appearances of a disconnected instant” (2013, 64). By trying to turn these disconnected chapters into a story, Dyer is doing what John Berger and the Swiss photographer Jean Mohr did in their photo-texts, according to Dyer’s own analysis. In *Ways of Telling*, Dyer writes: “While photographs isolate, Berger and Mohr are attempting to ‘un-isolate’, to give a sense of unfolding that is not dependent on a linear narrative” (1986, 116). This would be the best description of the un-linear, photographic, narrative of *The Colour of Memory*.

I am using the term “photographic” on purpose. In a metafictional intermission in chapter 19 (which became chapter 20 in 2016 and ebook editions), Dyer himself compares his first novel to an album of snaps. Surely, the idea of structuring a work of fiction as a family album is not original: in English literature, we can find the likes of Anita Brookner, Penelope Lively and Jonathan Coe using this fictional device, before and after Dyer. Yet, what makes Dyer’s work utterly original is that he does not construct his written album as a sum of photographic ekphrasis: his chapters *are* the photos. Here is how he explains his narrative project:

This book is like an album of snaps. In any photos strangers intrude [...] Hidden among the familiar, laughing faces of friends are the glimpsed shapes of strangers; and in the distant homes of tourists there *you* are, at the edge of the frame, slightly out of focus, in the midst of other peoples’ memories. We stray into each other’s lives. [...] That is what is happening here. Look closely and maybe there, close to the margin of the page, you will find the hurried glance of your own image [...].

Often what happens accidentally, unintentionally, at edges or in the margins of pictures—the apparently irrelevant detail—lends the photograph its special meaning [...] These details absorb and transform—and are themselves absorbed and transformed by—the principal action. The main subjects become saturated by the accidental inflections of attendant details. The distinction between foreground and background collapses [...]. (2006, 182).

Dyer does not only make an attempt to create a link with the readers, asking for their empathy and suggesting a possible identification with his side. Here he is also affirming his determination to recreate in his writing that haphazardness which is at the core of all snaps.

In his essay on poetry and photography, the French poet Yves Bonnefoy (2014) asserts that what he calls “le photographique”, that is to say the impact

and the influence of photography on the experience of the world, is a matter of regard and chance. “Le hasard est actif dans l’image photographique”, he writes, “il détourne l’esprit du dire de la composition, s’il y en a une, il donne à voir que les choses existent donc comme telles, en un être-là irréductible à l’esprit” (21).

The very last pages of *The Colour of Memory* show how Bonnefoy’s “le photographique” can be translated into words. Here is a small excerpt:

I picked up a sweater with a shirt inside, taken off at the same time—how long ago? — and thrown carelessly on a chair. By the skirting board was a pair of shoes, the outside of each heel worn down almost to the sole. How much meaning was contained in the accidental arrangement of those things? How far back would you have to go to decipher the simple creases of that shirt, to establish how it came to be lying there, like that? (252).

As he writes in *The Colour of Memory*, Dyer drafts into words the accidental arrangement of things, often striving with the impossibility of giving a meaning to it, “like a photographer whose finger presses the shutter by reflex” (181).

In his second work of fiction, the collection of short stories about famous jazz musicians, *But Beautiful* (1991), Dyer seems to confirm another intuition by Bonnefoy: “La photographie, qui dit le non-être par sa perception du hasard, c’est aussi, et elle est seule en cela, ce qui nous met sans médiations en présence d’autres êtres que nous, en présence de leur présence” (57).

Indeed, in *But Beautiful*, Dyer deals with moments in the lives of musicians like Thelonious Monk, Chet Baker, Charles Mingus, Art Pepper, Bud Powell and others, taking the cue from their photographs. Dyer himself writes in an afterword that throughout his book he relied more on photographs than on written sources, and he refers to the works of such photographers as Carol Reiff, William Claxton, Herman Leonard and many others. Yet, only one photograph is reproduced in the volume, before the opening, and it is used to illustrate the way Dyer will use photography in his book. The photo, by Matt Hinton, shows three musicians—Ben Webster, Red Allen and Pee Wee Russell—caught in a moment of rest. None of them is doing anything interesting and for this reason, the observer is not likely to remember all the details of the image, or to attribute details that are not there to it. Dyer comments:

The fact that it is not as you remember it is one of the strengths of Hinton’s photograph (or any other for that matter), for although it depicts only a split second the *felt duration* of the picture extends several seconds either side of that frozen moment to include—or so it seems—what has just happened or is about to happen: Ben tilting

back his hat and blowing his nose, Red reaching over to take a cigarette from Pee Wee [...] (2012, IX).

This is what Dyer will do in the following chapters: all his stories start from an attempt to imagine the “before” and the “after” of famous jazz photographs. Even though he never quotes the photographs that have inspired him, any reader can discover them just by comparing the stories told by Dyer with the photographs taken of their protagonists by the photographers listed at the end. “Good photographs are there to be listened to as well as looked at; the better the photograph, the more there is to hear” (IX-X), Dyer affirms in his Foreword, thus establishing the parallel between music and photography which will run throughout the book. And he goes on, referring to the only photo reproduced in it:

In Hinton's photo we hear the sound of Ben turning the pages of the paper, the rustle of cloth as Pee Wee crosses his legs. Had we the means to decipher them, could we not go further still and use the photographs like this to hear what was actually being said? Or even, since the best photos seem to extend beyond the moment they depict, what has just been said, *what is about to be said* [...] (X).

The note preceding the text ends on these questions. The stories are an attempt to answer them. Obviously, the idea that the duration of a photo extends much beyond the moment of the shot is not new. Dyer takes it directly from John Berger, to whom *But Beautiful* is dedicated. In 1982, Berger wrote:

[...] in life, meaning is not instantaneous. Meaning is discovered in what connects, and cannot exist without development. [...] An instant photographed can only acquire meaning in so far 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. (2013, 64).

Let us see, then, how Dyer lends a past and a future to a photograph. Here is the beginning of the first chapter of *But Beautiful*, dealing with the solitude and death wish of sax player Lester Young:

It is the quiet time of the evening, between the day people heading home from work and the night people arriving at Birdland. From his hotel window he watched Broadway grow dark and greasy with halfhearted rain [...] He lay down on the bed, making only a slight dip in the soft mattress, convinced he could feel himself shrinking, fading to nothing. (5).

As the hum of traffic resumed he [...] returned to the windowpane and shut his eyes. When he opened them again the street was a dark river, its banks lined with snow (27).

In the final pages, where he lists the sources of his book, Dyer admits that for Young's story "the biggest help was Dennis Stock's justly famous photograph of Lester in the Alvin Hotel" (219).

Reading the story, it is quite apparent that the author had not only this photo in mind, but also all the other pictures that Stock shot during that session. As John Berger (2013) noted, "before a photograph you search for what was there [...] if there is a narrative form intrinsic to still photography, it will search for what happened, as memory or reflection do" (100). Surely not by chance, Dyer's way of telling the stories behind and beyond famous jazz photographs (without ever quoting or reproducing them) is a way of searching for their "intrinsic narrative form."

Dyer has carried on this search quite peculiarly in his essays, which are acclaimed all over the world for their originality. This is not the appropriate place to discuss his essay writing. Here it will only suffice to remember that its main characteristic is a sort of erratic quality. Dyer is a master of digression, and the peculiarity of almost all his non-fiction is that, while pretending to deal with a certain subject, either he never tackles it or he ends by building yet another picture of himself and his own many idiosyncrasies.

Yet, the most striking feature of Dyer's writing is his ability to dismantle the boundaries between genres. Therefore, it is not surprising that in his volume on photography, *The Ongoing Moment*, that appeared in 2005, though sticking to his subject in a way, which is quite unusual for him, he rejects any theoretical, historical or documentary approach, in favour of a narrative attitude. Paradoxically, he takes as a model Borges' Chinese encyclopedia, declaring that his purpose is to organize the infinite possibilities of photography in a sort of casual order. He quotes Walker Evans' list of categories of images, Roy Striker's indications to the Farm Security Administration Photographers, and Robert Frank's list of possible photographic subjects as accidental and provisional hints for the direction of his own work. The result is a taxonomy where "there is a great deal of seepage or traffic between categories" (6), thus having the "static grid of taxonomy [...] melt into the looser, more fluid form of narrative or stories" (7).

The way Dyer examines famous photographs in *The Ongoing Moment* is more akin to short fiction than to essay writing or photographic theory. For mere reasons of space, I cannot deal in detail with Dyer's narrative critique of photography. I will just give an example of what I call his "photographic writing." Here is how he tackles *Main Street. Saratoga Springs*, a 1931 photo by Walker Evans:

The more I look at this photo the stranger it seems, for the street looks like it might not be a street and could actually pass for a canal or a river. [...] Not so much parked as moored, the cars seem oddly amphibious. The trees have something of the watery melancholy of weeping willows. [...] The carefully incremented details—cars, trees, buildings—fade and recede into an unfathomable, indistinct mass of grey. That's when you realize that although it may be a picture of a street that looks like a river, its real subject is time.

[... it] is a quietly audible photograph, preserving not just the view of the street but its sounds: the swish of an occasional car, the slow drip of rain from trees. What you hear most clearly, though, is a sound from earlier in the day: the bell—the memory of the bell—as you entered the barbershop, alerting him to your arrival. He was tipped back in the customers' chair, comfy as a sheriff, reading a paper that he began folding away, taking in the unfamiliar face (in need of a shave) at the door, glad of the custom, confident in the knowledge that if it was a haircut you wanted you had come to the right place. And all of this [...] seemingly happened at the very moment the bell began the chime that lingers, even now. (204-205).

As you can observe, Dyer does not describe the photo, but his feelings about it. This is the reaction of an imaginative writer more than a critic. First, he gives us a visionary impression of space, and then he hints at the temporal dimension of the photo by suggesting its sounds, thus confirming that the best photos are audible, as he wrote in *But Beautiful*. At this point, he is ready to imagine the “before” of the shot: what happened before the photographer leaned on his window sill at the United States Hotel in New York and took the picture. This “before” is a short story, ending in the “after” of the photo, when the sound of the barber's bell still lingers in the air.

Lastly, I would like to hint at one of Geoff Dyer's latest works, *White Sands* (2016), a peculiar travelogue, whose central idea is that “we are here [anywhere] to go somewhere else” (2017, 37). Relating his disappointment at Gauguin's sites, Dyer realizes that the only place which intrigued him in French Polynesia was a football pitch “nibbled short”, with “the goal mouths worn out”, surrounded by “a mixture of deciduous trees” (29). Sitting “behind the nearest goal so that it framed the one at the far end of the pitch” (30), he recalls the cover of a jazz record featuring “a photograph of an empty goal post, very white, backed by a wall of dark green trees” (*ibid.*). Later, finding a reproduction of that image in Luigi Ghirri's famous book, *Kodachrome*, he identifies the main characteristics of what he calls “the Ghirresque” in it: the absence of a narrative “to suggest what might be going on either beyond the spatial frame or beyond the moment depicted” (32); the lack of any “incentive to move on, to turn the page and look at another”; in short, an experience that “might [...] best be described as ‘Staying’” (32). Whilst Ghirri's photograph is similar, in Dyer's opinion, to “a still from a dream” (32), the forsaken Polynesian pitch appears to him “like a forgotten

photograph depicting the moment when it is remembered and rediscovered” (31-32). Just as in *The Colour of Memory*, where you learn only at the end that a casually retrieved snap was the motor of the whole story, in his latest work Dyer reaches the meaning of his disappointing journey by recalling a photographic image of stillness. Paradoxically, all his moving around seems to come from a perpetual waiting for something better, a wish, “to stick around forever, to see what happens, how it all turns out” (223). A desire to see if, eventually, the wind will blow through the dark foliage behind the goal, a lonely footballer will tread on the pitch, and a ball will enter into the frame.

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