John Berger’s Endless Text: Aesthetics of the Fragment, the Nouveau Roman, and Storytelling

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The aim of this essay is to examine the employment of the aesthetics of the fragment in relation to storytelling in selected works of John Berger. It will discuss how Berger focuses on presenting narratives that are often episodic in nature and call upon the reader to impose individual interpretation, composing a story from fragments, similarly to the initiators of the nouveau roman, who refuse traditional narrative techniques such as plot structure, characters, and setting. Further, it attempts to demonstrate how Berger exercises his narrative authority through self-referential intrusions, which provide the readers with experiences specific to the writer’s own reality, simultaneously stressing the impossibility to offer a coherent description of highly subjective, totalising experience, a strategy that enables him to introduce a larger discussion about the nature of conventional character and narrative in his works.

In And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos John Berger writes: ‘If we storytellers are Death’s Secretaries, we are so because, in our brief mortal lives, we are grinders of these lenses.’ Telling stories requires sharp optics, and thus Berger trains lenses on various matters, his narratives moving beyond time and space, between the particular and the universal. The author, homo narrans, provides rich, multifaceted, unique stories, capturing their temporality and their timelessness. In Berger’s writing, traditional storytelling is combined with formal experiment, and spinning tales is made challenging to the reader.

As the quotation shows, telling for Berger is intricately entwined with seeing. The author of Ways of Seeing meditates on the preverbal experience provided by images, and through his stories verbalises the experience of seeing. Roland Barthes states: ‘At the origin of Narrative, desire.’ Berger demonstrates that the desire to see and be seen, to tell and be told has an ontological basis. His texts frequently revolve around looking and telling, vision and narration: the ambivalence of sight is often highlighted in his work, as he is one of the critics of vision. He is a raconteur of the present, casting light on important matters where most turn a blind eye, drawing attention to overlooked issues, reconstructing sense invisible at first glance. He denounces the dominant visual order and points out the dialectics of the seer and the seen, the surveyor and the surveyed. Citing Ben F. Stoltzfus’s

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comment on Alain Robbe-Grillet, it may be stated that Berger’s ‘novels are a searching attempt at re-learning to see the world’.

The insistence on the sense of sight results in the fragmentariness of Berger’s texts, a fragmentariness which reflects a shattered view, making Berger an inheritor of Cubism. The fragmentary nature of experience of the commonplace is often reflected in the form of Berger’s texts. As David Caute points out, Berger ‘attempts to translate Cubism into literary terms’.4 Further, it may be argued that this method resembles some of the representatives of the école du regard, which is another name for the French nouveaux romanciers who eschewed mimesis and strived for objectivity. Berger’s writing shares other characteristics with the experimental narratives of the authors published by Editions de minuit, sometimes also called the Midnight Novelists. For instance, he employs traditional narrative tools only to challenge them: he sets linear narratives against innovative, fragmentary ones; he tends to include generic expressions, such as ‘once upon’, to foreground the role of storytelling devices; his narrators are self-conscious, at times intrusive, constantly questioning the legitimacy of narration, which demonstrates the all-embracing potential of stories and further enhances the self-referentiality of his texts; and he straddles many genres, narrating in essays as well as introducing the essay form into narratives.

This essay will explore the episodic form in Berger’s writing, mainly drawing on examples from And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos (1984) and G. (1972). I will argue that Berger employs some of the devices of the nouveaux romanciers, as his texts frequently escape genre boundaries, explode them, and create a decentred universe of their own. I will investigate how Berger explores the metaphysics of storytelling through the employment of various, frequently innovative narrative devices. Thus, I will discuss technical aspects of narratives as demonstrated in Berger’s writing in curious associations between traditional storytelling strategies and innovative ways of presenting stories, with a special emphasis on the employment of the aesthetics of fragment.

**Fragment**

Critics have pointed out Berger’s liberal treatment of plot and his penchant for episodic narrative. For instance, Sukhdeh Sandhu writes,
