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Recommended Citation

Hawley, J. C. (2006). Edward Said, John Berger, Jean Mohr: In Search of an Other Optic. In S. Nagy-Zekmi (Ed.), *Paradoxical Citizenship: A Tribute to Edward Said* (pp. 203–210). Lexington Press.

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Edward Said, John Berger, Jean Mohr: Seeking an Other Optic

John C. Hawley

We have no known Einsteins, no Chagall, no Freud or Rubenstein to
protect us with a legacy of glorious achievements.

Said, *After the Last Sky* (17)

This humble epigraph spoken on behalf of the Palestinian people by one of its most visible apologists now serves ironically as his own epitaph, for Edward Said surely has achieved as impressive a position in academia as anyone in the twentieth century, and he now enters the lists of memorable contributors to the human project. One notes that such a sentence, relatively brief as it may be, nonetheless bristles with the combative nature of much of Said's best ideas—the notion of achievement, of working toward the production of a “legacy,” of intellectual work that serves the role of armor or soldiering. And, of course, behind the creation of such a sentence stands the question of perception, of self-presentation in the world, and of how the world chooses to define an individual or, in this case, an entire people. Edward Said, famous for his groundbreaking work on the portrayal of colonial peoples by their nineteenth and early twentieth century masters, was clearly haunted all his life by the curse and the blessing of his own hybridized identity as a Palestinian living abroad and mingling with a world that would have been happy to reward him for quietly ignoring the discomfiting facts of his origins.¹

Self-perception, which permeates his writing on the Palestinians, obviously energizes his broader ethnic concerns because it first presents itself as a personal

question: am I, he seems to ask, the person that the western world (or the Middle East, for that matter) seems to think that I am? By extension, are the Palestinian people as comprehensively understood by their enemies and sometime friends as they might be? How might the world's way of seeing Palestinians be enriched and brought closer to my own experience of my people and myself? This essay is a brief discussion of Said's lifelong struggle with this hermeneutic question: how is one "interpreted" by the larger society, and with what political consequences.

In "Bursts of Meaning," Edward Said's 1982 review of John Berger's *Another Way of Telling*, he remarks that "Berger's project is to distinguish the authentic from the merely successful, and to save the former from the ravages of the latter" (149). One might muse that Said's own work hinges with that observation, and that he himself sought to distinguish the "authentic" not only from the "merely successful" facts of his own academic life, but also from the merely *unsuccessful* self-positioning of the Palestinian people vis-à-vis the world community, and, more pointedly, their homeland. Whereas he defends what some saw as Berger's sentimentality, he himself turns a passionate, committed, yet clear eye towards the Palestinian "Question" and recognizes that his people are not simply victims. Said concludes his review with the following caveat:

Two questions are left unanswered by Berger's work. First, can one really undertake aesthetic/intellectual projects in the private sector, so to speak, and then launch out from there directly into politics? Unlike Lukács and Gramsci, Berger fails to deal with the power of ideology to saturate culture. There can be no unilateral withdrawal from ideology. Surely, it is quixotic to expect photographic interpretations to serve some such purpose. The second question is the central one of oppositional politics—what to do? Photography, Berger says, deals with memory and the past. What of the future? Even if he wishes to deal only with cultural politics, *Another Way of Telling* demands a further step which Berger does not take: connecting his aesthetics with action. (152)

The year after he wrote that, Said began to collaborate with Swiss photographer Jean Mohr, who had worked with Berger on *Another Way of Telling*. One must assume that he is seeking to correct what he saw as an omission in Berger's collaboration with Mohr, and that *After the Last Sky* will unabashedly use aesthetical questions to enter the realm of politics. Such an assumption is justified by Said's stated frustration in the book's preface, in which he describes his initial encounter with Jean Mohr. Before *After the Last Sky* appeared three years later, at Said's urging Mohr was commissioned to take photographs of Palestinians and was allowed to mount the exhibit at the United Nations. He was forbidden to attach any words to the photos other than the name or place represented. While noting the politics of this act, Said nonetheless saw an ironic value in it, as well, since

the problem of writing about and representing—in all senses of the word—Palestinians in some fresh way is part of a much larger problem. For it is not as if no one speaks about or portrays the Palestinians. The difficulty is that everyone, including the Palestinians themselves, speaks a very great deal. A huge body of literature has grown up, most of it polemical, accusatory, denunciatory” (*After*, 4).²

By contrast, the Berger/Mohr collaboration seems remote (literally) from the conflicts of the Middle East, and the fact that Mohr was not allowed to attach words to his United Nations exhibit may have upset Said more than it upset the photographer, if we are to judge by *Another Way of Telling*. Writes Mohr:

To make successful portraits, it probably helps to have taken some self-portraits, and also to have learnt to accept the photographs others have taken of yourself. Otherwise, how is it possible to understand the embarrassment, the worry, even the panic, which often assails people when they know they are being photographed? (Berger 38)

By contrast, Said's book is a protest against being interpreted by others. The Berger/Mohr book has several essays by Berger and a short bit of writing by Mohr, but the heart of the volume consists of a series of photos in a French farming village over a year or so, presented pretty much without comment. Various photographs or sections of them are repeated, arranged non-chronologically, etc., and this suggests an implied but ambiguous commentary. The pictures and their arrangement raise questions that the author does not wish to answer. Thus, in his preface Berger protests that the book is not simply “reportage,” but is a “work of imagination,” shaped by a philosophy: “A photograph,” he writes, “is a meeting place where the interests of the photographer, the photographed, the viewer and those who are using the photograph are often contradictory. These contradictions both hide and increase the natural ambiguity of the photographic image” (7). Berger underscores the centrality of this openness to interpretation by describing it as the other way of telling that he chooses as his book's title—a telling that is not verbal.

Said recognizes and admires this quality in Berger, writing that “The best thing about him. . . is his relentless striving for accessible truths about the visual arts—their ambiguity, memorial enchainments, half-conscious projections, and irreducibly subjective force” (“Bursts. . . ” 149). But one senses that Said distrusts the “natural ambiguity” that Berger valorizes in photography. *After the Last Sky* is full of words, words that surround the many portraits and elicit from them the story that Said imagines (or, in some cases, knows) they tell. “[*After the Last Sky*] is not an ‘objective’ book,” Said warns his readers (6). And yet, the natural ambiguity of Mohr's photographs cannot be fully evaded. What is that old Palestinian man thinking as he stares back at the camera? Possibly, it is something close to the words that Said puts in his mouth; but perhaps it is something quite unexpected. Said sees what Berger is attempting, and accepts its power to draw the viewer into a newly imagined world. Thus, he writes,

The richer the photograph in quotation, the broader the scope for creative interpretation. . . . In destroying the notion of sequence, Berger allows one to see mutual 'energies of attraction' between photographs, so that, as he says, the ambiguity of photographs 'at last becomes true.' ("Bursts. . . ." 151-52)

Characteristically, though, Said introduces a political sense that is more explicit than Berger's: "Photographs," he writes, "are therefore potentially insurrectionary, so long as the language interpreting them does not, like most semi-ological discourse, become 'reductive and disapproving'" (151). He is quoting from Berger and emphasizing the aesthetician's Marxist roots, but he is using him to explain why his own book is so much clearer in its politics. He correctly senses in Berger a central dissatisfaction with unjust social structures and master narratives that impose an artificial linearity on time. "All photographs are possible contributions to history," writes Berger, "and any photograph, under certain circumstances, can be used in order to break the monopoly which history today has over time" (109). But even more compelling for Said is Berger's narrowing of the struggle to something more personal and even family-based. "Revolutionary actions are rare," writes Berger.

Feelings of opposition to history, however, are constant, even if unarticulated. They often find their expression in what is called private life. A home has become not only a physical shelter but also a teleological shelter, however frail, against the remorselessness of history; a remorselessness which should be distinguished from the brutality, injustice and misery the same history often contains. . . . 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. (105-108)

What difference do these two approaches make on the viewer (and reader)? In his short verbal section of *Another Way of Telling*, Jean Mohr conducts an interesting experiment. He shows five photographs to a market-gardener, a clergyman, a schoolgirl, a banker, an actress, a dance-teacher, a psychiatrist, a hairdresser, and a factory worker, and records the story that each constructs to describe what is seen. Then Mohr explains "what was happening" in the photo. In each case, the engagement by the viewer is revelatory of his or her interests and worldview, seldom revelatory of the "real" story behind a particular photograph. For Berger, the "silence" surrounding Mohr's photos is an important prelude to a hermeneutic moment, that is as much about the art of photography as it is about the particular subject matter that Mohr captures: "Are the appearances which a camera transports a construction," Berger asks, "a man-made cultural artifact, or are they, like a footprint in the sand, a trace *naturally* left by something that has passed?"

The answer is, both. The photographer chooses the event he photographs. This choice can be thought of as a cultural construction. The space for this construction is, as it were, cleared by his rejection of what he did not choose to photograph. The construction is his reading of the event which is in front of his eyes. It is this reading, often intuitive and very fast, which decides his choice of the instant to be photographed. Likewise, the photographed image of the event, when shown as a photograph, is also part of a cultural construction. It belongs to a specific social situation, the life of the photographer, an argument, an experiment, a way of explaining the world, a book, a newspaper, an exhibition. Yet at the same time, the material relation between the image and what it represents (between the marks on the printing paper and the tree these marks represent) is an immediate and unconstructed one. And is indeed like a *trace*. The photographer chooses the tree, the view of it he wants, the kind of film, the focus, the filter, the time-exposure, the strength of the developing solution, the sort of paper to print on, the darkness or lightness of the print, the framing of the print—all this and more. But where he does not intervene—and cannot intervene without changing the fundamental character of photography—is between the light, emanating from that tree as it passes through the lens, and the imprint it makes on the film. It may clarify what we mean by a *trace* if we ask how a drawing differs from a photograph. A drawing is a translation. (Berger 92-93)

For Berger, the photograph itself is a *quotation*: “And an art of translation cannot usefully be compared to an art of quotation” (111). Further words move it in the direction of a translation. Simonides of Keos long ago suggested that “*poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens*” (poetry is a speaking picture, painting a silent [mute] poetry). But even Berger considers a painting different from a photograph exactly there—in that a painting, as a translation of “photographic” raw material—is no longer as “mute” as the photograph.

For Said, on the other hand, translation in *photography* is also necessary, at least for his purposes. It is undeniable that this makes *After the Last Sky* a far more determined book than is Berger’s. Mohr does not conduct an experiment in viewer-involvement with the photographs he takes for Said’s book. It is as if Said does not trust his viewers to come to a “correct” interpretation of what they are seeing. It is as if the politics are more important than the artistry. Why would that be? Said complains that

I feel impelled to bring logic, history, and rhetoric to my aid, at tedious length. We [Palestinians] need to retell our story from scratch every time, or so we feel. What we are left with when we get to scratch is not very much, and memory alone will not serve. . . . We—you—know that these are photographs of Palestinians because I have identified them as such; I know they are Palestinian peasants, and not Lebanese or Syrian, because Jean has been my witness. But in themselves these photographs are silent; they seem saturated with a kind of inert being that outweighs anything they express; consequently

they invite the embroidery of explanatory words. (*After 75*, 92)

It comes down to the question, as in so many postcolonial texts, of who is given authority to speak for the "inert" beings that remain inaccessible. Said protests in his preface that too many unauthorized voices have attached explanatory narratives to Palestinian issues, and he cannot risk allowing the photographs to "speak for themselves." Nonetheless, he recognizes the inherent ambiguity that even he cannot translate. "I cannot reach the actual people who were photographed, except through a European photographer who saw them for me," he writes. "And I imagine that he, in turn, spoke to them through an interpreter. . . . Now the faces you see looking out on the world exude not so much the resignation of passively endured oppression as the reserve of something withheld from an immediate deciphering" (14, 91). Part of the difficulty is the physical inaccessibility of Palestine to Said, part is the quiet refusal of Palestinians to explain themselves to the casual viewer, and part is the international refusal to listen when the subject in question attempts to narrate its own story: "our narratives in general," argues Said, "have little official or recognized status; few people have given us the privilege even of having a narrative, much less of publicizing it; as outlaws we are always so censored and interdicted that we seem able only to get occasional messages through to an indifferent outside world" (130). As this essay's opening quote suggests, Said is ever-conscious of the Israeli narrative that he hears on a daily basis, and he finds it so dominant in world discourse that Palestinians also seem defined by it:

"What I have been saying," he explains, "is that we ourselves provide not enough of a presence to force the untidiness of life into a coherent pattern of our own making. At best, to judge simply from my case, we can read ourselves against another people's pattern, but since it is not ours—even though we are its designated enemy—we emerge as its effects, its errata, its counternarratives. Whenever we try to narrate ourselves, we appear as dislocations in *their* discourse" (140).³

Thus, the "orientalism" that he finds in the West's imagination of the Arab, in general, is here translated onto a smaller map, that of Palestine. In such a theatre, Said finds it imperative that he speak clearly and loudly, and that he not be heard as simply responding to a stronger and more resonant voice.

But he also makes the point that this is finally impossible, and that Palestinian desperation grounds itself in a sense that this is increasingly so. The ambiguity that Berger identifies as centrally important to photography, Said translates as brokenness in the photographs of Palestinian people. That is, Mohr's best work conveys the "essential national incompleteness" (165), "the de-centered role" (130) that Palestinians have willy-nilly taken on. Their literature reflects this as clearly as do Mohr's photos. "The striking thing about Palestinian prose and prose fiction," observes Said, "is its formal instability. . . . Our characteristic mode, then, is not a narrative, in which scenes take place *seriatim*, but rather broken narratives, fragmentary compositions, and self-consciously staged testi-

monials, in which the narrative voice keeps stumbling over itself, its obligations, and its limitations" (38). In commenting on the book, W. J. T. Mitchell recognizes that the idea of *After the Last Sky* is ultimately "to help bring the Palestinians into existence for themselves as much as for others; it is that most ambitious of books, a nation-making text" (321).

It is an undeniably sad and desperate "picture" that Said "paints," and one that cannot be wished away with brave reference to Palestinian resilience. To do so would be to impose, once again, a narrative that comforts those parts of the world that are stable and rooted in geography. It is this resistance to "history" that Said admires in Berger's work, where he finds "an argument *against* linear sequence—that is, sequence constructed by Berger as the symbol of dehumanizing political processes. For Mohr and Berger," in Said's view, "the contemporary world is dominated by monopolistic systems of order, all engaged in the extinction of privacy, subjectivity, free choice" ("Bursts. . . ." 150). Translated onto the land of Palestine, the extinction becomes a more literal concern for Said. This, he says, is why he *can* not let the pictures speak for themselves—for, they can *not* speak. This effects not only the construction of *After the Last Sky*, but of everything that he has written. "The net result in terms of my writing," he concludes, "has been to attempt a greater transparency, to free myself from academic jargon, and not to hide behind euphemism and circumlocution where difficult issues have been concerned. I have given the name 'worldliness' to this voice, by which I do not mean the jaded savoir-faire of the man about town, but rather a knowing and unafraid attitude toward exploring the world we live in" ("Between Worlds" 565).

But if the pictures in *After the Last Sky* cannot speak and must be (over)determined by Said, he ultimately protests that the Palestinians whom he also addresses in the book can and must find venues to speak for themselves. "I would like to think," he concludes, "that we are not just the people seen or looked at in these photographs: We are also looking at our observers. We Palestinians sometimes forget that, as in country after country, the surveillance, confinement, and study of Palestinians is part of the political process of reducing our status and preventing our national fulfillment except as the Other who is opposite and unequal, always on the defensive—we too are looking, we too are scrutinizing, assessing, judging. We are more than someone's object. We do more than stand passively in front of whoever, for whatever reason, has wanted to look at us" (*After* 166). Thus, in Berger's terminology, Said has left an indelible trace on the photographs that he presents to us, with such personal investment, in *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*.

Notes

1. "For myself," writes Said, "I have been unable to live an uncommitted or suspended life: I have not hesitated to declare my affiliation with an extremely unpopular cause. On the other hand, I have always reserved the right to be critical, even when criti-

cism conflicted with solidarity or with what others expected in the name of national loyalty. There is a definite, almost palpable discomfort to such a position, especially given the irreconcilability of the two constituencies, and the two lives they have required" ("Between Worlds" 565).

2. On the occasion of this present collection of essays, in which Edward Said is valorized and fondly remembered, we should nonetheless also recall the venom that his work has elicited. See, for example, Ronald Radosh, Werner Cohn, and "Anonymous."

3. "We have no dominant theory of Palestinian culture, history, society; we cannot rely on one central image (exodus, holocaust, long march); there is no completely coherent discourse adequate to us, and I doubt whether at this point, if someone could fashion such a discourse, we could be adequate for it. Miscellaneous, the spaces here and there in our midst include but do not comprehend the past; they represent building without overall purpose, around an uncharted and only partially surveyed territory. Without a center. Atonal" (129). But this is not simply a case of Palestinians against Jews. The marginalization of his people expresses itself within the Arab world, as well, as he ironically recounts: "My friend. . . noted the man's wish to register Palestinian superiority over the Arabs in all things (intelligence, martial arts, trading), a superiority expressed by him in the phrase 'we are the Jews of the Arab world'" (55).

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