

**Julia Margaret Cameron's photographic works in context:
'Everything around the image is part of its meaning' (Berger 1997)**

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Abstract

John Berger's assertion points to the fact that no artistic creation exists in a vacuum. Instead, meaning in any piece of visual art is inextricably connected to the cultural, technological, biographical and socio-historical contexts of its conception. This essay will endeavour to demonstrate the significance of these various contexts through an exploration of Julia Margaret Cameron's photographic works. Furthermore, consideration will be given to the ways in which a reader's understanding of Cameron's work might alter owing to changes in the context of reception and the manner in which the images are reproduced

At the time of Julia Margaret Cameron's career, photography's status as an artistic medium was tenuous, as many regarded it as an unimaginative, 'chemical and physical process' which allowed 'nature to reproduce herself' (Clarke 1997, p13). Cameron's expressed intention was 'to ennoble photography and to secure for it the character and uses of high art' (Cameron cited in Ford 2003, p.83) and so her pictorialist photographs, like *A Siby* (Cameron 1870) and *The Parting of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere* (Cameron 1874), gain meaning from their position within this debate. They are serious and not dissimilar to the greatly admired history paintings of the age, as Cameron attempts to show that her art can display comparable learning and high-mindedness. In a similar way, it is possible that the soft focus of Cameron's images should be understood as an attempt to imitate painting and avoid the brutal, detailed literalness of the lens (Ford 2003, p57). Hence, in the context of art history, Cameron's photographs begin to appear like ersatz history paintings.

Even some ostensibly straightforward portraits are given mythological titles (*The Echo* (Cameron 1868) and *The Mountain Nymph Sweet Liberty* (Cameron 1856)), and this changes meaning through a process with Roland Barthes describes as 'anchorage' (Barthes 1984, p.40). Here, titles are used in an attempt to fix an authorized academic interpretation, even if 'the text produc[es] (invents) an entirely new signified' (Barthes 1984, p27). This supports Berger's statement because the titles and mythology behind the images significantly inform the meaning of the photographs, lending them highbrow associations which the reader might otherwise not perceive.

This desire to imitate painting and subsume photography in the realm of high-art is problematized by its position in what Walter Benjamin calls 'the age of mechanical reproduction' (1936). Benjamin argues that 'the presence of the original is prerequisite to the concept of authenticity' and, since multiple images can be created from one negative, the 'aura' and 'the authority' of photography is forfeit' (Benjamin 1936, no page). Thus Cameron's admittance that 'only the prints signed by Browning, Herschel and Tennyson [... commanded] a high price (£1)' (Ford 2003, p40) is significant. The inclusion of the sitter's signature reveals an intention to re-establish 'the authority of the object' (Benjamin 1936, no page) and present it as exclusive and unique, not simply a reproduction. Understanding the way in which Cameron tackles the debate over photography's worth as art can, therefore, greatly affect a reader's understanding.

It can also be argued that Cameron's portrait photography was influenced by ideas which the Victorians had regarding physical appearance. Colin Ford discusses the relevance of 'phrenology', the pseudo-science of 'deducing the power and range of a person's mental abilities from the actual shape of the head', claiming that it might explain why she refused to photograph someone if she 'objected to the top of his head' (2003, p47). This discourse gives new meaning to Cameron's choice of extreme close-ups of her sitter's heads. Once more Berger is right in his claim that 'everything around the image is part of its meaning' (Berger 1977), as knowledge of phrenology allows readers to understand why certain features are emphasized. The prevalence of profile photography becomes meaningful, as Cameron's depiction of Tennyson, for example, allowed the sitter to display his enviable cranial dimensions (Cameron 'Alfred Tennyson with Book', 1865).

Although Anne Higonnet contends that Cameron's career was 'effectively ended by her departure for Ceylon in 1875' (2003, p6), she continued to make photographs, turning her lens on her 'native workers'. Colin Ford defends these sensitive images and states that 'even if Julia Margaret did refer to her sitters as "natives" [...] she gave them dignity' (Ford 2003, p78). Yet it is significant that the colonial images do not have symbolic titles or contain any mythological references. Instead, they are *A group of Kalutara Peasants* (1878), *Estate Workers Ceylon* (1875-79) or *Untitled* (1875-79). Even if the 'natives' are 'given dignity', they are denied parity: they are excluded from the esteemed history genre and depersonalised in large group shots which create a spatial gulf between 'us' and 'them'. Such comparisons are only made possible by collections such as *Julia Margaret Cameron: The Complete Photographs* (Cox et al 2003), which presents the images in a selective order and thus establishes a dialogue between the different periods of her oeuvre. In this sense, the physical context of reception has encouraged new meanings by placing the images in implicit juxtaposition.

The position of Cameron and her work within the context of a patriarchal Victorian society is one which has been tirelessly emphasised and revisited. Studies and exhibitions of Cameron's work have titles such as *Cameron's Women* and *Women tho' Love* (Wolf 1998). These editorial or curatorial decisions alter meaning by directing the reader to one particular understanding of a photograph at the expense of alternative ones. John Berger, generalizing about the Western art tradition, contends that 'men act' while 'women appear' (1977, p47), and a similar dynamic is seen in Cameron's choice to depict 'men great thro' genius ...

women tho' love' (Higonnet 2003, no page). Her description of her own work colours their reception and it is no surprise that her women are named 'Eros' and 'Aurora', while the men like Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Carlyle retain their own names, identities and, therefore, achievements.

Much has been written about the value, meaning and cultural significance of Julia Margaret Cameron's photographic creations. In fact it can be said that this super-abundance of analysis is as important as the works of art themselves and that it further justifies Berger's claim. As this essay will attempt to demonstrate, interpretations of Cameron's work have been made which focus on the largely disparate issues of gender, colonialism, class, and even technological development. The important thing here is not who or what is correct but rather to understand why such varied and sometimes contradictory interpretations are presented. Different critics have approached the photographic images with specific agendas, personal biases, and different stores of knowledge, which produce diverse readings. In this way the context of the reader's subjective state and personal background can delineate the image's meaning.

Steve Edwards, for instance, betrays a keen interest the cultural effects of European Imperialism. In his discussion of colonial photography, he reminds us that such photographs were 'never intended for the gaze of those who appeared in the photographs' (2006, p22). Thus, from a post-colonial vantage point, the photographs are not easily seen as simple portraits or benign anthropological studies; they are exercises in power, objectification and ownership. Regardless of whether Cameron took these photographs with compassion, the meaning which these images may have originally had does not survive independently of time. This is because, as Roland Barthes explains, 'the photograph depends on the reader's knowledge and the reader's cultural situation' (1984, p28). Cameron's authorial intention is, in fact, dead and irrelevant, and 'our appreciation of an image depends also upon our way of seeing', and not the artist's (Berger 1977, p10).

Walter Benjamin argued that mechanical reproduction means that one 'can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original', and that this 'reactivates the object reproduced' (1936, no page), opening it up to new meanings. Therefore, it is deeply significant that a large number of these Ceylon images can be seen in the National Media Museum in Bradford. In the context of a city which is both lauded as a

champion of multiculturalism and shamed as the battleground for the 2001 Race Riots, the images take on a plethora of new meanings. They might be viewed positively as relics from a less equal age, or work as kindling for further racial tension.

Indeed, there are several other ways in which the context of the National Media Museum impacts upon the meaning of Cameron's images. Placing a greatly enlarged reproduction of Cameron's *Iago, Study from an Italian* (1867) on the wall, adjacent to a glass cabinet filled with antiquated photographic equipment 'reactivates' the image. Not only might the modern enlargement encourage readers to mistake Cameron's trademark soft-focus as a consequence of over-enlargement, the picture is presented as demonstration of what the cameras were capable of producing. Indeed, the proximity of the primitive cameras and the explanation of 'the 'wet plate' collodion process' (National Media Museum, no date) means that the mechanical and technical aspects of the image are prioritised for the viewer over the imaginative or creative.

An additional factor which is external to the image but constructive of meaning is indeed the significance of the technological means available to Cameron. The collodion process which she used required 'long exposures (counted in minutes)' (The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, no date) and she expresses frustration about this:

'I was half-way thro' a beautiful picture when a splutter of laughter from one of the children lost me that picture [...] I took that child alone appealing to her feelings and telling her of the waste of poor Mrs Cameron's chemicals and strength if she moved.' (Cameron cited in Ford 2003, p40)

Being aware of this technological 'limitation', the reader could reassess his/her understanding of the personalities depicted by Cameron and even our stereotyped assumptions about our Victorian society. Indeed, the reason for Tennyson and the child's sullen stare, it is likely due to the fact that a four-minute grin or other animated expression is almost impossible.

Additionally, the soft-focus of Cameron's photographs, which 'instil[s] a sense of breath and spirit' (Higonnet 2003, p6) into fixed images, might also be understood in terms of Victorian photographic technology. Ford described Cameron's lens, stating that:

‘it is about 8cm (3”) in diameter, has a fixed stop of 5cm [. This] tells us it would have been virtually impossible with such a lens to get a close-up portrait in focus on the 28x23cm plates used in Julia Margaret’s camera’. (2003, p40)

In this instance, Berger’s claim that meaning in visual art derives from all contexts ‘around the image’ might be inaccurate because the image retains the qualities of ‘breath and spirit’ regardless of whether they were created deliberately, accidentally, or through the restrictions imposed by the photographer’s technology.

This general idea of the art work’s autonomy and its power to remain ‘independent of time and place’ (Bell 1992, no page) has been argued by Clive Bell. He states, in stark contrast to John Berger, that ‘to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas or affairs’; ‘nothing but a sense of form and colour’ (1992, no page). In light of what has already been argued in support of the transformative power of context, Clive Bell appears fanciful and misguidedly romantic. For example, it is highly unlikely that a nineteenth century American slave owner would react to *A Group of Kulutara Peasants* in the same way as Mahatma Ghandi, even if both were instinctively moved by Cameron’s careful use of ‘tonal variations’ and ‘sense of form’ (1992, no page). Clive Bell’s rejection of the contextual significance is based upon a presupposed mutual exclusivity of the intellect and the aesthetic sense. As the examples provided in this essay demonstrate, both faculties are inter-dependent and an individual’s reaction to a photograph is shaped by innumerable contexts and the culturally specific process of socialization.

To conclude, this essay has suggested several ways in which factors external to the images - like curatorial decisions or the scale and location of reproductions- can profoundly influence the meaning of the photographs. If Berger is right in arguing that ‘everything around the image is part of its meaning’ (1977, no page), then this is largely due to the interpretive power which readers have, and the lack of control which the author wields over meaning. Therefore, in this perpetual play of context, use and signification, it is only possible to guess at what meanings these images will have (or be made to have) for future generations of readers.

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