The Moment of History

John Berger’s Modernism After Realism

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Abstract and Keywords

John Berger is widely recognized as one of the most influential and idiosyncratic British art critics of the twentieth century; less well known is that many of his ideas about art were first explored in novels responding to Cold War politics. This chapter analyses the engagement with art in Berger’s fiction and criticism of the 1950s and 1960s, situating it within broader debates among British New Left writers such as Raymond Williams and Doris Lessing. It argues that Berger used novels like A Painter of Our Time and G. to explore the limitations of postwar social realism and to articulate a return to the unfulfilled promise of visual and literary modernism, or what Berger called in his novels and criticism the ‘moment’ of Cubism.

Keywords: John Berger, New Left, Cold War, Cubism, A Painter of Our Time
Writing at the height of the Cold War’s impact on British art in the 1950s, John Berger declared that ‘[a]ll works of art, within their own immediate context, are bound directly or indirectly to be weapons: only after a considerable passage of time, when the context has changed, can they be viewed objectively as objets d’art’.¹ This declaration’s reduction of art to a weapon in political struggle might seem a jarring point of origin for a writer whose later work went on to explore art’s relationship to the ‘mystery of the visible’: the enigma and ambiguity of appearance, the experience of the presence of absence, and the possibility of revelation where ‘appearance and meaning become identical’.² His early rejection of individual response and agency in the face of the determinations of historical context seems an equally unlikely precedent for a figure whose genre-blurring writing across art criticism, fiction, photo essays, and poetry has used Berger’s own life and encounters with works of art as points of departure, producing one of the most singular and idiosyncratic bodies of work in postwar British writing. The enormous impact of his 1972 television show and book *Ways of Seeing* (1972), which Martin Jay described as ‘the launch of visual culture studies’, has tended to fix Berger’s place in literary history as a polemical Marxist art critic and theorist of visuality, photography, and drawing, rather than an author of some twelve novels and even more books of essays, stories, documentation, and autobiographical reflections.³ But Berger is no more primarily an author of fiction than an art critic and visual theorist. His significance in the history of the relationship of fiction to visual art in the postwar period lies in the continual blurring of genres that characterizes his writing on art, and the ways in which this enabled him to conceive of a novel’s relationship to history as extending beyond its reflection of or determination by its ‘own immediate context’.

(p.98) Both these features of Berger’s engagement with art emerged as responses to Cold War debates about the legacy of modernism, the possibility of realism, and the politics of aesthetics in Britain in the 1950s. Related debates have been charted in France and the United States in previous chapters, because they were transnational in scope, but Berger’s early criticism and first novel *A Painter of Our Time* (1958) engage these debates in a more direct way than Beckett’s turn to the spasming body or Gaddis’s private anxiety about being quoted out of context. This was because of Berger’s public and
influential role in defining the meaning of realism in British art criticism in the early 1950s, which later went on to shape the reception of the fiction, theatre, and cinema of the British New Wave at the end of the decade. But Berger’s attitude towards realism was transformed by the crises of 1956 that led to the foundation of the British New Left, and *A Painting of Our Time* stands as one of the first examples of an overlooked flourishing of what can be called New Left literature in Britain, sharing much with a more well-known example of the genre, Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (1962). This attempt to rethink the relationship between art and politics as part of the British New Left caused Berger to reconsider the unfulfilled promises of the moment of Cubism, resulting in a reconceptualization of visual modernism as neither a teleological process of formal development (as it was for Greenberg and at times Beckett) nor simply a determined product of the context of modernity (as in contemporary academic modernist studies), but as a response to modernity which crystallized aesthetic forms which could only be understood retrospectively, and which therefore enabled art to engage with and respond to historical moments across time. This theory of the art historical moment is what Griselda Pollock sees as ‘one of Berger’s critical contributions to a non-teleological approach to the history of regimes of representation’.¹ It enabled what Tim Armstrong has called Berger’s ‘self-conscious revision of historical method’ in *G.* (1972), one which used narrative structures of multiple perspectives and an interplay between synchronic and diachronic connections to prevent history—the history of modernism—from appearing as a totality. This turn back to the moment of modernism enabled Berger to view the novel as capable of illuminating and anticipating historical moments beyond those of its immediate context of production during the political upheavals of the late 1960s. But the necessity of rethinking both art and the novel’s relationship to history was prompted not by what Berger saw as the failure of the 1968 protest movements, but rather by an earlier failure of realism.

(p.99) The Failure of Realism
The realism that dominated debates about the future of British art and fiction in the aftermath of the Second World War was as pervasive as it was vaguely defined. A similar conviction as to the importance of realism to the self-understanding of postwar British novelists coupled with a difficulty in theorizing
this realism has long accompanied literary historical accounts of the 1950s. As Marina McKay and Lindsay Stonebridge have observed, a polarization between ‘experimental and realist fiction ... has dominated accounts of this period’, one which has often reduced realism to being everything that experimentalism—or modernism—is not. Fiction’s return to realism was also deeply bound up with the expression of national and class identity: for Raymond Williams this realism was ‘a return to older forms, and to specifically English forms, especially by comparison with the most widely discussed work of the 1920s and 1930s, which was largely experimental in form and cosmopolitan in spirit’. These debates about realism and experimentation are well known and oft repeated; less commonly are they connected to what James Hyman has called the ‘Battle for Realism’ in British art that took place at the beginning of the 1950s between the ‘social realism’ advocated by Berger and the ‘modernist realism’ theorized by David Sylvester. This battle took place in mass-market periodicals (Berger in the New Statesman, Sylvester in The Listener), national exhibitions like the Festival of Britain, and international forums such as the Venice Biennale; it engaged with the criticism of Clement Greenberg as well as drawing on central European Marxist thought, and like debates in relation to the novel it too was bound up with debates concerning the legacy of modernism and national and class-based identities. Although this earlier ‘Battle for Realism’ shaped the critical reception of fiction and drama later in the decade—‘kitchen sink’ realism was coined by Sylvester in an article in the vigorously Atlanticist periodical Encounter as a slur against Berger’s social realism—it was more internationally wide ranging and theoretically engaged than the debates sparked by novels like Kingsley Amis’s Lucky Jim (1954) or John Braine’s Room at the Top (1957), debates dismissed by Doris Lessing as being ‘extremely provincial’ for their ignorance of international debates about realism among the New Left and decolonization movements. Yet by 1958 Berger’s advocacy of an internationalist social realism had been undermined by the crises of 1956 that led to the foundation of the New Left, with the recognition of the limitations of this failure of realism and of the limitations of the role of the critic providing the point of origin for A Painter of Our Time.
Berger’s career as a full-time art critic began when he started writing for the *New Statesman & Nation* in 1951. From the outset his criticism was marked by an oscillation between dogmatism and doubt, one typified in his response to the legacy of visual modernism. ‘The fact is’, he wrote in 1951, ‘that the modern movement—with all its subdivisions—has now disintegrated; partisan discipline has disappeared and most of the theories have finally lost their precision in practice’. As a consequence, ‘the critic cannot be, as he was in the Twenties, a confident dogmatic missionary. He must be an interpreter, aware of the validity, not only of the artist’s intentions, but also of the layman’s doubts’. The economy of modernist artistic production had also disintegrated. ‘The disappearance of what was really an official system of private patronage has robbed the contemporary artist of any vital sense of communication, and his work has therefore tended to become—in an ironically different sense—more and more private [italics original]’. Public subsidy could put the artist ‘into closer contact with his collective patrons’, giving him or her the ‘opportunity of working under the stimulus and tension of rather more definite directives’. The tension between responding to the perceived collapse of modernism with the acceptance of individual doubt or by submitting to collective demands would recur throughout Berger’s criticism in the 1950s, soon playing out on the international stage of Cold War politics.
Equally typical of Berger’s early art criticism is his focus on all aspects of art as a social product: tradition, patronage, the audience, the relationship between theory and practice, and the role of the critic. This shows the influence of his time spent as a ‘unofficial student’ of the Hungarian art historian Frederick Antal. A representative of the central European intellectual tradition Berger drew on in his own criticism, Antal’s experience as a participant in the revolution that led to the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, and then as a Jewish émigré from Nazi Germany, was one source for the character Janos in A Painter of Our Time. In an obituary published in the Burlington Magazine, Berger wrote vividly of the impact of their weekly meetings during the early 1950s. Antal had studied under Heinrich Wölfflin and Max Dvorák in Berlin and Vienna before forming the Sonntagkreis group in Budapest along with Georg Lukács, Béla Balázs, Karl Mannheim, and Arnold Hauser. These figures introduced him to the Marxism that characterized his approach to art history, an approach praised by Walter Benjamin for pushing the formal interpretation of art up against the ‘concrete bedrock of past historical experience’. In his own words, Antal saw style as ‘a specific combination of the elements of subject and form, [where] the thematic elements offer an immediate transition to the general outlook on life, the philosophy, from which the pictures in question derive’. His approach drew not only on Marxist theories of culture, but also on the art historical methodology of the Warburg Institute, which he praised for its view of style as a unity of form and subject matter. In his obituary, Berger emphasized two aspects of Antal’s legacy. ‘Art history for him was not just an “interesting” field to be excavated: it was a revolutionary activity. Facts were weapons unearthed from the past to be used for the future’. But Berger also emphasized, in a telling looseness, ‘Antal’s feeling for paintings and sculpture. He never simplified the mystery out of art—and by mystery I mean the power of a work of art to affect the heart [italics original]’. This portrait of a mentor betrays a conflicted attitude towards the art as a tool in class struggle versus art as the producer of ineffable affective experience: weapon versus mystery.

In his writings in the New Statesman & Nation, Berger attempted to reconcile collective demands with individual experience through his theory of realism. Experience as identification with the object was what Berger saw as ‘the
philosophic basis of realism’, which ‘differs from naturalism—the mere copying of appearances—by stressing the underlying and reliable facts of the physical world, by disclosing the common intensity of sensuous experience, by identification with the life and natural development of the subject’. In the process of composition the artist is brought ‘closer to the object, until finally you are, as it were, inside it: the contours you have drawn no longer marking the edge of what you have seen, but the edge of what you have become’. Berger’s theory of realism owed much to Georg Lukács, whose work was introduced to Berger by Antal. In *Studies in European Realism*, which was published in English in 1950, Lukács defined realism in literature as ‘the recognition of the fact that a work of literature can rest neither on a lifeless average, as the naturalists suppose, nor on an individual principle which dissolves its own self into nothingness. The central category and criterion of realist literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular in both characters and situations’. Through the depiction of types who show the dialectic between individual and society, the human as a social being, realism is able to represent ‘man and societies as complete entities’: realism is thus the aesthetic realization of the totality which, as Martin Jay has argued, is central to Lukács’s thought. In the catalogue for the 1952 exhibition *Looking Forward*, Berger argued that the realist painter ‘tries to deduce a typical truth’, and thus that ‘[r]ealism is not a method but an attitude of mind [italics original]’. This was the attitude Berger argued defined social realism. Reviewing the Arts Council’s *Young Contemporaries* exhibition in 1952, he expressed his sense that ‘[s]lowly but quite certainly something is happening to British painting’ in the works of ‘John Flavin, Derrick Greaves, Susan Horsfield, Stewart Waghorn, Leonard Roads, Elizabeth Dolby, and most outstanding of all, those by Edward Middleditch’. He saw in them ‘a deliberate acceptance of the importance of the everyday and the ordinary’, a realism in the sense of ‘the painters’ imaginative identification with the thing or person painted so that the result, however usual the subject, is compelling and real’. However, the fact that Berger failed to provide a reading of an individual painting, and that the actual works he admitted caused him most ‘excitement’ that year were the Expressionist landscapes and portraits of Peter Lanyon, Keith Vaughan, David Bomberg, and Oscar Kokoschka,
accentuates a sense that his social realism was as yet theory in
search of its practice.\textsuperscript{20}

Nevertheless, this realism was part of a broader international
movement, with Berger arguing for a similar ‘identification
with the life and natural development of the subject’ in the
French painters Roger Grand and Paul Rebeyrolle, the Italian
painter Renato Guttuso, and the neorealist cinema of Roberto
Rossellini.\textsuperscript{21} In Berger’s criticism, a commitment to realism
was a means by which British art could participate in a
common international socialist culture. This transcended the
polarization between (\textbf{p.103}) a native English realism and
rootless cosmopolitan experimentalism present in the accounts
of critics like Raymond Williams. Attempting to define this
international social realism, Berger again claimed to
distinguish between realism’s aesthetic and epistemological
claims: ‘Realism is not a manner but an approach and an aim.
The Realist is not concerned with presenting facts for their
own sake, but with proving the objective reality of conclusions
which can be drawn from them’.\textsuperscript{22} This view of realism as an
artist’s elucidation of an ‘objective’ or typical truth from their
identification with their subject—one suspiciously often being
the reality of the proletariat’s role in history—contrasted
sharply with that of David Sylvester. For Sylvester, who drew
on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, realism in painting
involved the disclosure of the embodied nature of vision and
the truths of sensory perception. Formally this could be
achieved either by the afocal abstraction of Klee or the
figuration of Francis Bacon, but in either mode realism was a
matter of sensation and affect.\textsuperscript{23} Sylvester’s attack on the
work of Bratby and Smith, which he granted to Berger was a
‘social not a visual realism’, ostensibly saw the patterning and
distortion of their work failing to achieve the true realist’s
‘passionate identification with the object, both its form and
meaning’. But he also mocked their depictions of ‘a very
ordinary kitchen, lived by ordinary people ... a kitchen in
which ordinary people cook their ordinary food, and doubtless
live their ordinary lives’ that ‘doubtless’ leaving little doubt of
Sylvester’s view of the ordinary.\textsuperscript{24} This dismissal of ‘The
Kitchen Sink’ was published in \textit{Encounter}, a transatlantic
periodical launched the previous year by the Congress for
Cultural Freedom with an explicit anti-Communist programme:
it aimed to promote the ‘love of liberty’, to ‘regard literature
and the arts as being valued in themselves’, and it saw these
values as being embodied in the modernism of the previous
generation: its first issued opened with an extract from
Virginia Woolf’s diaries. While the ways in which painters
like Smith and Bratby realized Berger’s already imprecise
definition of realism were indeed unclear, what is not in doubt
is that arguments about realism served as a proxy for a debate
about the politics of British art in a polarized Cold War world
that would inform the production and reception of Berger’s
first work of fiction.
The ‘Battle for Realism’ with Sylvester was not the only way in which Berger’s criticism was impacted by the kind of Cold War cultural politics around visual modernism in which both Beckett and Gaddis’s engagements with art were ensnared. In 1953 the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London ran an open competition for a ‘Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner’, intending to commemorate victims of political persecution. The ICA played a central role in the institutionalization and promotion of modernism in Britain after the war, and given the complex relationship of this postwar institutionalization to the promotion of postwar liberal politics, it is perhaps unsurprising that both the competition and Berger’s excoriating response were embroiled in Cold War cultural politics. The prize was awarded to Reg Butler, but Berger’s attacks in the *New Statesman* were directed less at Butler’s proposed sculpture than at the concept of the competition itself. He attacked the “‘generalising’ illusion” of a prisoner without a name, for a sculpture without a site, ‘open to all ideologies: well intentioned, but impossible’. The competing ideologies of different prisoners are ‘totally opposed’, and to fail to acknowledge this means ignoring that ‘we are all implicated in that conflict’.26 The competition sealed the link between the modernist sculpture practised by Butler and the ideology of an art beyond ideology. In fact, as Robert Burstow has shown, unbeknownst to the ICA the competition had been secretly supported and funded by the Office of Strategic Services, a front for the CIA. It was part of a propaganda effort to build a ‘modern-day “Statue of Liberty” commemorating the victims of what Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in the bible of Cold War liberalism, had recently identified as the ultimate symbol of totalitarianism, the concentration camp’.27 The failure of any sculpture to make a particular prisoner’s situation ‘typical’ left Berger convinced that the “‘official’ modern art of the West is now bankrupt”, though unbeknownst to him this was hardly true financially.28

The controversy around the Unknown Political Prisoner competition and a sense of the success of what he called ‘the Movement’ of social realism solidified Berger’s confidence and political beliefs in the middle of the decade. At the beginning of 1956, he confidently declared in an article entitled ‘The Battle’ that ‘[t]he movement gathers more and more force ... What is this movement? The kitchen-sink school? Social Realism? The name, deprecating or proud, doesn’t matter. It is
The same year, artists championed by Berger such as Bratby, Greaves, and Smith represented Britain at the Venice Biennale. The awarding of the International Sculpture Prize to Lynn Chadwick focused international attention on British art, and led to the perception of realism as a distinctive national style. Yet at the height of his critical influence, in 1956 Berger announced a year’s break from criticism in order to write a novel. In his ‘Exit and Credo’ written in the New Statesman, he cast doubt on his victory in the ‘Battle for Realism’. ‘In fact’, he wrote, ‘very little has been won, and it is only the petty minded who reduce a philosophical belief to one superficial, easily recognizable “style”’. His confidence in the role of the critic was also fading: ‘[t]he critic is a bastard—in more senses than one. Finally he has no definite status. He is merely the index of the tension, the relationship between the changes taking place in art and the changes taking place in the ideas and economics of the time’. As of yet his political beliefs remained: ‘I am with’—though not one of—‘the Communists’. What was changing, however, was Berger’s understanding of what kind of art realized the desires of revolutionary politics. In an article significantly titled ‘The Necessity for Uncertainty’ which appeared in June 1956, Berger elaborated on the problems of the contemporary painter. ‘We do not know’, he declared, ‘what British socialist art will be like’, therefore an openness to uncertainty was required to allow it to come into being. This involved a reassessment of the potential of modernism: the ‘discoveries of the modern masters such as Cézanne, Van Gogh, Léger and Picasso … [are] now in the hands of Socialists to continue and make their own’. These were now seen as a form of repressed revolution: ‘But because they did not then understand the social and political nature of this revolution, they put all their revolutionary fervour into their art considered as art. Because they did not see how to make a revolution in the streets, they made one on their canvases [italics original]’. 1956 was a turning point for Berger. He quit criticism to write a novel, he was increasingly disillusioned with the aesthetic and political promises of social realism, and he began to turn back to the unexplored potential of visual modernism. As he began writing, however, these personal changes would be joined by those of much wider significance.

A Painter of Our Time and New Left Literature
On 26 June 1956, Berger sent an outline of a proposed book, subtitled *A Portrait of the Artist as an Émigré*, to Secker & Warburg—the publishers of *Encounter*. The book, he explained to Fredric Warburg, ‘is to (p.106) be written in the 1st person. And this “I” will be myself, Berger, art-critic’. He continued:

The main character is to be an elderly émigré painter, a refugee from the Nazis, whom I get to know during the last years of his life in this country. My relationship to him, in terms of the book, will be (very roughly) that of a Boswell to a Johnson. There are many prototypes for him: Kokoschka, Adler, Martin Bloch, and so on. But, although he will obviously be drawn from my experience of men like these, he will be a composite and imaginary character. N.B. The reader must not realise this. He must be left in doubt, tending to believe that he is a real painter whom I know but he has not heard of.32
From its inception Berger’s ‘story’ was aimed at a generically unstable auto/biographical space, with Berger as both the ‘I’ and a contemporary Boswell. Berger’s autobiographical ‘I’ was intended to be split between the ‘I’ of the narrator and the portrait of the émigré, with this in turn folded within a fictional biography masquerading as a true one, a deception which the ‘reader must not realise’. Laura Marcus has written that the generic ‘instability or hybridity’ of auto/biographical writing has been central to its use in interrogating ‘topics such as subject/object, self and identity, private and public, fact and fiction’. Auto/biographical writing can appear as ‘either a dangerous double agent, moving between these oppositions, or as a magical instrument of reconciliation’. Framing auto/biographical writing as a ‘double agent’ or ‘instrument of reconciliation’ brings out its particularly charged status during the early Cold War, an era demanding testimony of political loyalty, as experienced by Gaddis in Chapter 2, and populated by confessional accounts of Communism as ‘the god that failed’: autobiography here acting as an instrument of the subject’s reconciliation with objective reality.

If Berger’s aim to deceptively distribute his autobiographical self across the roles of biographer and autobiographical subject embraces the double-agent status of auto/biographical writing, it also problematizes his previous conceptualization of realism, drawn from Lukács, as the reconciliation between subject and object. In this effort to interrogate the politics of art in the Cold War, questions of form and genre were paramount.

As Gordon Johnston has shown in his account of the book’s publishing history, the generic instability of the work in progress that Berger submitted (p.107) during 1957 caused Warburg much unease. After reading a draft in April, Warburg wrote to Berger that he was ‘worried about this book’. Challenged by Berger, he explained his doubts in a subsequent letter:

In the main I feel that it is falling at the moment between two stools. On the one hand it has not the vitality of a novel and the characters don’t come to life. On the other, it has not the authenticity of a documentary or non-fiction book on art and artists. In other words it is a hybrid, or to use a nastier word, a mongrel, and, as I said, I am worried about it.
Berger’s response was acerbic: ‘We began this affair on grounds of what I naively believed to be mutual understanding—compare my previous letters with yours—my illusion has fortunately been destroyed. Let us reduce our relationship to the purely business level, and about that I will come to see you in due course’. In the end, Berger completed the manuscript, and Warburg agreed to publish it in the autumn of 1958, but not without expressing his concern to Berger about ‘how we treat the book, which is on a strange borderland between fiction, reportage, and aesthetics’. Warburg’s response to Berger’s use of auto/biographical writing to blur the border between fact and fiction, and between the supposed neutrality of aesthetics and the politically biased nature of reportage, reveals his anxiety about its potential to act as a destabilizing double agent. Their exchange shows Berger’s awareness and exploitation of this perceived generic instability, and his refusal to settle on either of the ‘two stools’ set out by Warburg. Warburg’s recourse to the generic label of reportage is revealing, for it points to a crucial shift which had occurred between Berger’s proposal and his writing of the novel, which was finished by February 1958. This was caused by the Hungarian uprising of 1956, the resulting crisis it caused among the British left in general, and in Berger’s own writings in particular.
On 23 October 1956, up to 200,000 people assembled in front of the Parliament building in Budapest demanding the departure of Soviet troops from Hungary, the termination of military and economic dependency on the Soviet Union, free elections, civil rights, and freedom of expression. The uprising spread throughout the entire country through (p.108) the formation of local revolutionary councils supporting the revolution’s demands. By 28 October a new government including Lukács had been formed under Imré Nagy, which agreed to the revolutionary programme and freed political prisoners. On 4 November, Soviet forces attacked Budapest and by 11 November the uprising was broken, with János Kádár installed in power by the Soviets, initiating a period of brutal repression that would last until 1963.40 In the era of the Cold War, the fate of the Hungarian uprising of 1956 could only be decided in the context of overall world politics. It was inconceivable that the Soviet Union would allow the independence of an Eastern Bloc state, and it was equally inconceivable that the United States would risk a nuclear confrontation. These events intruded into the composition of A Painter of Our Time in the most literal sense: Berger pasted two highly significant articles from the Daily Worker into his manuscript notebook.41 The first, dated 24 October 1956, was the earliest report to appear about the uprising.42 The next day an editorial denounced the ‘counter-revolution’, a line backed up by a statement by the Communist Party of Great Britain.43 The second article by the journalist Peter Fryer triggered a crisis which reverberated far beyond the Daily Worker.44 Fryer was the Daily Worker’s Special Correspondent in Hungary, but in a letter published on 16 November, he announced that this article and three others sent to the paper had been severely altered, or not published, and that staff were not even allowed to read them, because they contradicted the Party line. The danger of counter-revolution did not exist; the Soviet troops who entered on 4 November ‘fought workers, soldiers and students; and they could find no Hungarians to fight alongside them’.45 Although Fryer’s claims were denied by the editors, he went on to publish his reports that year in a pamphlet entitled Hungarian Tragedy and it soon became clear that his reports were accurate.46
The novel’s émigré artist was named Janos Lavin (Janos being the Hungarian version of John) and this focus on the Hungarian uprising situated the novel’s investigation of auto/biography, realism, political loyalty, and the artistic representation of history within the international debates about the future of socialism that the suppressed uprising triggered. These debates raged in the letters pages of the *Daily Worker*: Eric Hobsbawm admitted the ‘tragic necessity’ of the Soviet invasion, while the historian Christopher Hill demanded ‘a very self-critical article ... of the *Daily Worker*’s presentation of news from Socialist countries’, a request that went unheeded.47 Berger’s focus on Hungary had autobiographical resonance given his friendship with Fredrick Antal, and in early drafts Janos’s Jewish identity and his experience of anti-Semitism was made explicit, whereas in the published text he is simply a ‘refugee’ helped by an organization ‘helping Jews and Nazi victims to get out of Germany [italics original]’.48 Janos’s Jewishness and experience of exile created another auto/biographical portrait, given that Berger’s father was a Hungarian Jewish émigré from Trieste. Another newspaper clipping included in the novel’s draft notebooks connected the novel to Berger’s critical writings on realism: a 1956 article in *The Listener* addressing ‘the Battle for Realism’ and attacking Berger’s account of Paul Rebeyrolle (without mentioning Berger by name). A note in the novel’s first draft equates Sylvester with a character called David Kenyon, an art critic ultimately not included in the published text.49 However, Berger’s own previous theory of realism as the unification of subject and object in a typical truth would be more the target of the novel than Sylvester’s realism of embodied experience and affect. This incorporation of newspaper clippings into his drafting process mimicked the technique of Cubist collage, whose nature was explained by Berger in an article written shortly after *A Painter of Our Time*:

Theoretically, the reality of an object for a Cubist consisted of the sum total of all its possible appearances. Yet in practice this total could never be arrived at, because the number of possible visual appearances (or aspects) was infinite. Consequently, the most the Cubist could do, was somehow to suggest the range of, the infinity of possibilities open to, his vision.50
The incorporation of newspaper clippings which expose the falsity of a single viewpoint on history—the *Daily Worker*’s account of the Hungarian uprising—and which allude to Berger’s own participation in a battle for realism—reality being either the unity of subject and object or the singular truth of embodied experience—shows a technique of Cubist composition informing a very different view of art’s relationship to reality. Both the totality of experience and of history, this account of Cubism implies, can never be grasped, only suggested by a multiplicity of viewpoints. With this new understanding of Cubism written after Berger’s first novel was completed, this also suggests that the narrative form of multiple perspectives would be a significant feature of this novel itself.

A second major consequence of the Hungarian uprising which impacted upon *A Painter of Our Time* was its role in catalysing the emergence of what Stuart Hall termed the ‘first’ British New Left; as he recalled, ‘[t]he term “New Left” is commonly associated these days with “1968”, but to the “1956” New Left generation, “1968” was already a second, even perhaps a third, “mutation”’. Reports of the uprising and its repression led to what Hobsbawm in his memoirs called ‘the political equivalent of a collective nervous breakdown’ among British Communists. Doris Lessing, like Hobsbawm then a member of the Party, elected in her autobiography to describe it as resulting in a ‘mass social psychosis’. Along with the artists Peter de Francia, Paul Hogarth, and Edward Middleditch, Hobsbawm, Lessing, and Berger were members of the ‘Geneva Club’, a formally non-aligned left discussion group organized by Berger, whose monthly meetings spanned the crucial years of 1955–7. Lessing’s autobiography offers a retrospective portrait of its activities during a time when she was closely involved in New Left activism with Berger:
John Berger had decided it was a bad thing writers met only writers, painters painters, architects—their own kind ... He hired the large room over a pub a minute away from Oxford Circus ... The place was full, it buzzed, it jumped, it vibrated. What a good idea we all thought, how clever of John Berger to have thought of it, and of course there must be many more such occasions. And then John called us to order and made a speech. It was a good cause of some kind, political. At once it was observed that the painters exchanged looks, were making for the door ... ‘Not again,’ people were saying. ‘We’ve been here before, too often.’ And so ended a brave attempt; but if politics had not intruded, we would all be there yet [italics original].
Loose as the ‘Geneva Club’ was, it did provide the self-consciously fashioned intellectual group in which Berger’s first novel was written. Its meetings were part of the broader transformations among British left intellectuals that followed the Hungarian crisis of 1956 and Khrushchev’s speech at the 1956 Congress of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union denouncing (p.111) Stalin’s crimes. 1957 saw the appearance of the two founding journals of the British New Left: The New Reasoner and Universities & Left Review, which in 1960 merged to form the New Left Review. The inaugural issue of Universities & Left Review featured an essay by Peter de Francia calling for the cultural politics of the post-1956 left to move beyond the terms of ‘debates concerning commitment, realism and social questions … [outlined] in John Berger’s articles in the New Statesman and Nation’.56 Berger’s response showed he had already left these positions behind, declaring himself no longer a practising committed critic, embracing instead André Gide’s genre-blurring view that ‘criticism is the spirit of creation’. What Berger did want to preserve in criticism was what he saw as its unique temporality: in order to truly situate a work historically, the critic must break out of ‘the continuous present’ and view works ‘imagining himself in the future, looking back on the present as we look back at the past’; viewing the present as the past transforms the future into ‘retribution’ for the victims of the past.57 The extract from A Painter of Our Time that appeared in the Summer 1958 issue of Universities & Left Review enacted a blurring between criticism and creation, misleadingly ‘subtitled as extracts from the diary of an elderly mid-European painter living in London during the 1950s’.58 It appeared alongside an essay on ‘Realism and the Contemporary Novel’ by Raymond Williams, who theorized the realist novel ostensibly in decline in Britain in terms similar to Lukács: it was a genre which offered a representation of a social totality, ‘a whole way of living in terms of the qualities of persons’.59 Both the complex temporality of criticism and the embrace of narrative uncertainty through the use of multiple perspectives show that Berger’s writing was refusing this demand for a representation of totality. But the fact that this was in tension with the established theorization of realism, and that it involved a turn towards an investigation of autobiography and the legacy of modernism, only made the novel more typical as an instance of New Left literature.
That the fiction of the New Left might require a new form in order to narrate its loss of faith in Communism and its search for new kinds of politics and subjectivities, and that this requires a turn to autobiography as well as a reconsideration of the legacy of modernism, is a major theme of Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (1962). As the writer Anna Freeman (p.112) declares to her psychoanalyst: ‘it’s a question of form’. For Anna, this is a question of modernism after Stalinism. In her Blue Notebook, Anna attempts her own ‘single day’ novel, a key modernist form used by Joyce, Woolf, and Richardson, wherein she compares writing about her period to Joyce’s account of Leopold Bloom’s defecation. In an earlier entry in her ‘Red Notebook’, Anna records attending a meeting to read Stalin’s writings on linguistics, the falsity of which causes her to think ‘of the novels about the breakdown of language, like Finnegans Wake’. In *The Golden Notebook*, the loss of faith in Communism appears in various forms, all of which involve a crisis in literary representation. In the first entry in the ‘Red Notebook’, Anna’s friend Molly tells of how, when asked by the Party to enact a self-criticism, to write about her ‘doubts and confusion’, she found herself writing ‘a whole thesis—dozens of pages ... What is it I want—a confessional?’ Anna’s own work for the Party involves proof-reading endless pro-Communist stories, whose falsity leads her to uncertainty—she cannot be sure whether they could be read ‘as parody, irony, or seriously’. Around the crucial year of 1956, Anna’s ‘Red Notebook’, like Berger’s manuscript for *A Painter of Our Time*, is taken over by newspaper cuttings, before concluding with a vignette about a Comrade Harry’s disillusionment with Communism after a visit to the Soviet Union, and the failure of his plan to write the true history of Communism. Neither Anna’s collage nor Comrade Harry’s proletarian perspective prove capable forms of representing history after Communism.

Lessing’s dramatization of attempts to find a literary form to narrate the loss of faith in Communism was, like Berger’s novel, part of an international tendency among left-wing writers and intellectuals. Previous accounts of Communist disillusion were already a prominent feature of British and American writing: George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* (1940), Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man* (1952), or the collection *The God That Failed* (1950) featuring contributions from Koestler,
Richard Wright, Stephen Spender, and André Gide. Wright’s contribution, ‘The Initiates’, is especially insistent on the relationship between writing and belief in Communism, providing an impetus felt most keenly when it disappears: ‘I knew in my heart that I should never be able to write that way again, should never be able to feel with that simple sharpness about life, should never again express such passionate hope, should never again make so total a commitment of faith’. Yet the crises of \textit{1956} sparked a different kind of post-Communist writing, whose new tendency to propose that a loss of Communist belief requires a new genre of writing beyond autobiography or fiction was observed in France by Maurice Blanchot in 1959. Blanchot distinguished between theoretical works concerned with a ‘renewal of method’ (‘renouvelée de la méthode’), and more searching works interrogating ‘the whole of life, and in which nothing of their [the writer’s] history would be completely excluded’ (‘tout la vie et que presque rien de leur histoire n’en fut tout à fait exclu’). In this latter category he placed André Gorz’s \textit{Le traître} (1958), Edgar Morin’s \textit{Autocritique} (1959), and Henri Lefebvre’s \textit{Le Somme et le reste} (1959). Blanchot questioned what form of writing could write about a political conviction which in its deepest sense was a form of subjectivity: ‘What will remain of such a thought which welcomed the total demands of Marxism, that is to say, the delivery from a thought seriously capable of rendering thought real and true’ (‘Que demeure-t-il d’une pensée qui, ayant accueilli les exigences totales du marxisme, c’est-à-dire la remise de la pensée au sérieux d’une action capable de la rendre réelle et vrai’). In these genre-blurring works, neither fictions, theoretical auto-critiques, nor autobiographies, ‘we feel that between the history of thought and personal history, the narrative, as well as the protest, hesitates, searching for a new path’ (‘[n]ous sentons qu’entre l’histoire des pensées et l’histoire personnelle, le récit, ainsi que la contestation, hésite, cherchent de nouvelles voies’). Blanchot’s probing questions about genre and politics were those Berger’s novel was attempting to answer.
A Painter of Our Time opens with a frame narrative entitled ‘The Beginning’, which introduces the concerns surrounding auto/biography, narrative perspective, and the relationship between art and politics that Berger grappled with while composing the novel. The narrator John arrives at the studio of the disappeared painter Janos Lavin. Searching through the studio, the narrator projects ‘my own feeling of confusion of loss’ onto everything except his painting, The Games, which was ‘already beginning to outlast the circumstances that had given rise to its being painted’. Projection is followed by mirroring, with the narrator noting the pieces of broken mirror Janos used for shaving and for viewing his canvas in reverse. The novel frames itself up as an investigation into these circumstances, setting up an exploration of the extent to which an art work can be explained by its context of production, or whether its significance lies in transcending it. Details about Janos’s life uncovered in his studio reveal to the narrator how little he knew about these circumstances: one photograph shows Janos in Prague after ‘having been forced to leave Hungary after the overthrow of the Soviet revolutionary government of 1919’; another shows him in Berlin with his then abstract paintings. The eighteenth-century furniture in his house is described as ‘autobiographical’: it ‘reflected—literally—a way of life’ (5). Searching for his copy of Diderot which he had lent to Janos, an allusion which places the novel in the tradition of art writing inaugurated by Diderot’s Salons, the narrator comes across a journal, in English, French, and Hungarian, detailing Janos’s life. It is this journal, translated by an anonymous friend, that follows the frame narrative, and it amounts to ‘a Portrait of the Artist as an Émigré’—the original title of Berger’s manuscript. In introducing the ‘journal’ the narrator claims ‘it was necessary to have also a commentary of background facts. This I have tried to write. I have also, with the help of my friend, tried to polish the translation’. The introduction ends: ‘Naturally, I have changed most of the names’ (7).

With its rhetoric of projection, reflection, and mirrored doublings, and the allusions to autobiography and art criticism, the frame narrative presents intersubjective understanding as always potentially frustrated by displacement and misidentification, a process explored through the literary device of the found text, translated journal, and commentary. The device of presenting a personal
journal within a larger narrative closely parallels Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*, making it a key form within New Left literature for investigating the relationship between private and public, the personal and the political. But whereas the fact that Anna Wulf is a writer entails that her journal, the frame narrative, and her own ‘fiction’ are all in the same medium, the source of the novel’s metafictional complexities, Janos’s status as a painter provides a different medium to think through questions of identity and recognition—and a different historical archive of formal possibilities. Janos’s diary entries, often short and aphoristic, lay out his ideas concerning the visual nature of intersubjective recognition. Projection reoccurs in a dream about his native Hungary: ‘Onto the huge Aföld sky a film was being projected as if it were a screen—a film of incidents from my life and paintings’ (22). But this, as John comments, was the dream of a ‘mirage that appears over the Hungarian plain [italics original]’ (22). When Janos describes the technique of cross-hatching, he calls it ‘the simplest visual example of the dialectical process’; when one set of parallel lines are crossed by another ‘you get a series of diamonds … these diamonds are like the future we work for’ (43). Out of the encounter between self and other, a potential future is created. Yet images from the past also haunt Janos’s present. Early in the journal Janos discovers that his friend Laszlo, a poet who remained in Hungary to support the Communist regime, has been executed after a public confession. Under the exigencies of the regime, Laszlo’s confession is meaningless, and so his memory takes the form of haunting images. Janos’s last memory of Laszlo is him saying ‘I shan’t see you’ when he leaves Berlin for London, and Laszlo refusing to return his gaze. As the diary and commentary continue, John discovers how little he actually knew about Janos, how little was revealed by outward appearance and public confession, mirroring Janos’s lack of understanding of Laszlo. In a series of paralleled misrecognitions, realism as the reconciliation between subject and object is called into question in both Communist and liberal democratic forms of life.
Laszlo’s refusal of recognition haunts Janos as he begins his way out of mourning by embarking on a new painting, The Games. Working on it, Janos thinks: ‘How difficult it is to paint eyes that do not appeal to the spectator. How difficult to think more of Laszlo’s life than his death’ (138). His thoughts on politics and art shift as the painting progresses: his realization that ‘art is the most inconvenient of activities, the least susceptible to will or legislation’ is ‘bitter for me to admit ... I who, as a man, believe in the collective, in the revolutionary class not the revolutionary individual’ (140). Producing this painting causes a turn away from realism back to Cubism. Seeking ‘as many frontal views as possible’ (138), Janos discovers: ‘What eyes Cubism has given us! Never can we make a painting of a single view. We now have a visual dialectic. How easy it should be for Marxists to understand!’ (145). He imagines this turn to ‘formalism’ would elicit criticism from the Party, yet he affirms that ‘in my painting their [the working class’s] victory consists of the way in which they have been painted’ (148). A realism of the unity of subject and object, brought into question by the refusal of the gaze or by the limitations of mere appearance, is replaced by Cubism as a manifestation of a ‘visual dialectic’, which, unlike the totality represented in the realism of Lukács (who Laszlo and Janos, tellingly, have read as young revolutionaries), is a future-oriented and incomplete process. This open-ended multiplication of perspectives is the form of the novel itself, with the journal and its commentary offering competing accounts of both John and Janos. Janos’s interpretation of Cubism as multiple perspectives and epistemological uncertainty informs the novel’s exploration of the competing truths of autobiography and fiction; as Janos reflects: ‘It is like listening to a story-teller because he tells good stories and then suddenly realizing that he is talking about his own life, about himself in the third person’ (128).
The optimism drawn from this rediscovery of Cubism’s visual dialectic is only temporary. John’s commentary on the diary during the year Janos (p.116) struggled to complete his painting reveals this was hidden to him at the time: ‘The outward evidence of Janos’s moods at this time was very undramatic [italics original]’ (143). Janos wonders whether he might ‘show these last few notes to J.’, about which John comments: ‘He never did show them to me. And although obviously these pages are argued in the kind of way that suggests Janos had public readers in mind, I now believe in the light of later events that he was really arguing with his own conscience [italics original]’ (155). However, after this aesthetic breakthrough, uncertainty is cast upon its motivations: the entry for March 1956—the month news of Khrushchev’s condemnation of Stalin reached the West—reads: ‘LASZLO WAS INNOCENT’ (176), suggesting a possible posthumous rehabilitation in a temporary thaw. The diary ends by fading out: ‘I have nothing to write … All around people are talking, but I have nothing to say’ (176). His final entry, appearing two days before he disappeared, opens: ‘If we think of ourselves as special creators, we are wrong’ (198). The novel ends with John discovering a letter from Janos, on a train going eastwards through Austria: ‘I go now to tell my mistake to those who are like I was [italics original]’ (199). John concludes:

What happened to him after this? We do not know …
Even worse, we do not know what he did. Did he stand by and watch during those terrible days in Budapest? Did he join with the revisionists of the Petöfi circle? Did he fight side by side with those workers’ councils who resisted the Red Army … Each of these possibilities is reasonable.

(200)

Even with access to ‘this man’s most intimate hopes, thoughts, confessions’ we ‘cannot with any certainty declare which of the courses of action he was bound to follow’ (200). The conflicting perspectives of the frame narrative, journal, and John’s commentary are put to use as forms to ensure that neither biographical nor historical truth appear as a knowable totality, refracting instead into the necessity of uncertainty.
Fixation upon this concluding demand for uncertainty, rather than the novel’s complex narrative form and its portrait of the loss of revolutionary hope, caused A Painter of Our Time to receive an extremely hostile review from Stephen Spender. For Spender, both Laszlo’s journal and ‘John’s’ commentary were simply the views of John Berger, identical to those expounded in the New Statesman. Spender’s review became an attack on what he saw as Berger’s justification of Communism, the truth of which was, in fact, Nazism. ‘Janos Lavin is an advocate of judicial murder … This method was put into practice at Auschwitz, where victims were spared for the purpose of murdering other victims, thus facilitating the liquidation of several million people’. Spender’s only attention to the form of the novel is to conclude that it reminded him of a book he found in Germany in 1945: ‘It was written by a man who was himself a frustrated poet and artist, in a form consisting partly of a diary, partly of vignettes, sometimes of narrative, (p.117) sometimes satirical … The novel was called “Michael”; and the author was the youthful Joseph Goebbels’. Aside from the tastelessness of comparing a novel by a writer of Jewish descent, about a Jewish victim of National Socialism, to a novel by Goebbels, Spender’s public role as a Communist apostate now editing Encounter, which appeared in Berger’s novel thinly disguised as Impact and described as a tool of ‘American museums’, might have made this attack expected. Yet the review had a powerful effect in burying the novel, with Berger accusing Secker & Warburg of failing to properly distribute and promote it, given Spender’s influence with Encounter’s publisher. In a 1966 letter, Berger went so far as to accuse Warburg of deciding ‘not to distribute the book’, adding, ‘I hope you will remember telling me this yourself’. This charge was repeated in a 1988 afterword to a reprint of the novel, claiming that after Spender’s violent reaction ‘Secker (who at that time were also publishing Encounter) decided to stop distributing the novel’. Gordon Johnston has pointed to Secker & Warburg’s central role in promoting Cold War liberalism in Britain, publishing ‘a body of literature whose critical reception and promotion in the 1950s was heavily circumscribed by the cultural polemics of the Cold War’, such as Czeslaw Milosz’s The Captive Mind in 1953, receiving funding from the Congress for Cultural Freedom for translations of Tibor Déry’s Niki in 1958, and selling the film rights for Animal Farm to the CIA. Johnston is correct in denying that A Painter of Our Time was explicitly suppressed by
Secker & Warburg, but the fate of Berger’s novel shows the extent to which Cold War politics shaped the course of British literature in the 1950s. Removed from the polarized world of London publishing, George R. Clay’s review for The New York Times had the perspective to perceive that ‘[i]t is in the nature of Mr. Berger’s message that we should never learn what Janos did when he got to Hungary’. In doing so, ‘Mr Berger has managed to dramatize one of the cardinal dilemmas of our age’. 72

The Moment of Cubism: G.
Why did an attempt to dramatize the dilemmas of art and politics during the Cold War lead Berger back to a reconsideration of Cubism? Why was this return, which in itself works against the linear teleologies implicit within social realism and Greenberg’s historicist theory of modernism, enabled by the writing of fiction rather than criticism? What was Cubism, for Berger, and what did it enable for his subsequent understandings of the relationship of the novel to history? By the end of the 1950s, Berger admitted that his championing of realism as the form of socialist art had been ‘a mistake’. His apostasy was noted in the Soviet Union: an article on ‘Revisionism of Marxism in Britain’, commenting upon the emergence of the British New Left and published in The New Reasoner, declared that: ‘In his article on “The Necessity for Uncertainty” John Berger, too, proves himself a strong supporter of contemporary Modernism … It is not hard to guess what this obsequious apologist of Modernism advocates: he disapproves of socialist realism in art and immediately gives himself away’. This is surprisingly true for a stock piece of Zhdanovist propaganda, with the one caveat that Berger would be better described as a obsequious apologist for Cubism. For Berger, Cubism was at once a formal technique characterized by multiple perspectives, and the aesthetic manifestation of a ‘moment’ of transformation in the experience of time and space which could not be understood in its own time, but only through retrospective re-interpretation. If this overdetermined interpretation of Cubist form lies outside the conventions of professionalized art history, it was crucial in shaping the narrative structure and radical historiography of the Booker Prize-winning G. As David James has shown, Berger’s account of Cubism’s unfinished potential was the model for what he calls Michael Ondaatje’s ‘cubist imagination’ as it engaged with postcolonial history; similarly, Arundhati’s Roy’s The God of Small Things (1997) takes as its epigraph G.’s core historiographical claim: ‘Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one’. This reception suggests that the deepest significant of Cubism for Berger lay in how it provided a means to think through the relationship between the novel and history, opening up fictional forms that can engage with history understood not as a linear teleology or totality, but as a discontinuous process shot through with moments of anticipation and retrospection.
Shortly after the appearance of *A Painter of Our Time*, Berger began to outline the vision of Cubism implicitly contained in Janos’s journal. These reviews were responding to a widespread reappraisal of Cubism that followed the major retrospective *Le Cubisme* in Paris in 1953. Douglas Cooper curated exhibitions of Léger in Paris in 1955, Braque in London in 1956, (p.119) and Gris again in London in 1958, while Roger Penrose curated *Portrait of Picasso* at the ICA in 1956. Academic canonization was ensured by the first doctorate on Cubism at the Courtauld, published by John Golding as *Cubism: A History and an Analysis 1907–1914*.\(^76\) In a 1958 review of Jacques Lipschitz, Berger wrote that ‘[t]he single static viewpoint in painting and sculpture can no longer satisfy the expectations deriving from our new knowledge of history, physical structure, psychology. We now think in terms of processes rather than substances’. The Cubists’ use of ‘multiple view-points within the picture’ was a discovery of ‘new knowledge’, as ‘self-sufficient as the truth’. Writing on Juan Gris the same year, he declared that ‘the real subject [of a Cubist painting] is always the same, and is the function of sight itself ... The artist, in other words, became his own subject, not in any subjective or egocentric manner, but as a result of his considering himself and the functioning of his own senses as an integral part of the Nature he was studying’. In so doing, ‘the Cubist formula presupposed, also for the first time in history, man living unalienated from Nature’.\(^77\) These early formulations still bear the trace of Berger’s engagement with realism, with Cubism somewhat awkwardly assuming the mantle of undoing the alienation between subject and object at the heart of Lukács’s theory of modernity. Nevertheless, they emphasize Berger’s key claim that if while ‘[t]heoretically, the reality of an object for a Cubist consisted of the sum total of all its possible appearances ... in practice this total could never be arrived at, because the number of possible visual appearances (or aspects) was infinite’.\(^78\) The questioning of totality marked Berger’s distance from the second generation of the New Left. One of its key documents, Perry Anderson’s ‘Components of the National Culture’ (1968), blamed the absence of a revolutionary student movement in British on a national ‘aversion to the very category of totality’, yet avoided the complexities of considering the role of art or literature in shaping a culture’s conceptualization of totality—an approach very different from Lukács’s treatment of Tolstoy, for example,
and certainly at odds with Berger’s suspicion of the value of totality as such.\textsuperscript{79}

The notorious theoreticism and philistinism of Anderson’s editorship of \textit{New Left Review} did not prevent the journal publishing the fullest expression of Berger’s revaluation of Cubism in 1967.\textsuperscript{80} ‘The Moment of Cubism’ positioned itself against the positivist disciplinary protocols of the ‘dealers, \textbf{(p. 120)} collectors, and cataloguers who go by the name of art historians’\textsuperscript{.} The essay opens with the curious assertion that Cubism ‘has not yet taken place’, that it waits ‘in an enclave of time, waiting to be released and to continue a journey that began in 1907’. Rather than naming a set of paintings, a style, or a policy, Cubism was a ‘moment’ in the experience of modernity, when the convergence of imperialism and monopoly capitalism, the invention of cinema, automobiles, the telephone, radio, and synthetic chemicals, and the discoveries of the psychoanalytic unconscious and special relativity cumulatively ‘changed the meaning of both time and space’, registering the effects of what Marx called capital’s ‘annihilation of space by time’, qualitatively transforming the nature of both.\textsuperscript{81} Through its use of a ‘multiplicity of viewpoints’, and the ‘diagramming of discontinuous spaces on a two-dimensional picture plane’, in a Cubist work ‘the forms portrayed never present themselves as a totality. The totality is the surface of the picture, \textit{which is now the origin and sum of all that one sees} [italics original]’. By escaping from the continuous space required by linear perspective, Cubist works were able to show that ‘[s]pace is part of the continuity of the events within it’ rather than a mere container for a time which must always be sequential; it thus created ‘the possibility of art revealing processes instead of static entities’\textsuperscript{.} Throughout the essay, the revolution of Cubist form is compared to that effected by Renaissance perspective, paralleling Erwin Panofsky’s argument for perspective as a ‘symbolic form’ of the Renaissance worldview. Just as Panofsky argued that Alberti’s perspective expressed and participated in the origins of the scientific worldview, the rational subject, and the modern consciousness of history as linear and taking place within homogenous time, so too Berger’s moment of Cubism saw it as a means to think through how modernity’s transformation of space and time transformed the understanding of history into discontinuous moments of shock and incongruity which cannot be situated in the linear time of
art history inherited from nineteenth-century historicism, but can only be understood through a process of retrospective re-interpretation. Cubist form, as a diagram of space and time as discontinuous processes, explained why the meaning of art works could not be understood in their own time: ‘the Cubists were not aware of all that we are now reading into their art’. Right down to the depths of the experience of historicity, Cubism ‘re-created the syntax of art so that it could accommodate modern experience’. 84
This emphasis on Cubism as a moment of rupture and discontinuity in history, and on the most significant aspect of its formal innovations being its multiple perspectives, cut against the grain of the dominant interpretations and evaluations of the 1950s and 1960s. These were typified in Golding’s *Cubism*, which viewed it primarily in formalist terms, and situated it within Alfred H. Barr’s linear and teleological narrative of the development of visual modernism. Berger’s emphasis on the interplay between discontinuity and totality generated by Cubism’s multiple perspectives looked back to some of the earliest interpretations of Cubism: Jean Metzinger’s description of Picasso’s ‘free, mobile perspective’, or Jacques Rivière’s claim that Cubism’s ‘several points of view’ were a negation of Renaissance perspective. Above all, as signalled by the epigraphs of Berger’s essay, he harked back to Apollinaire, who wrote of how, from 1907, Picasso and Braque ‘made every effort to represent several facets of figures and objects at once’. Berger did not deny what would become emphasized in the structuralist interpretations of Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss: that after 1910, Picasso increasingly drifted towards representation understood as a ‘sign referring to, but not imitating, its [an object’s] appearance’. Yet by presenting Cubism as an unfulfilled moment, Berger’s account avoids the teleology structuralist accounts retained from Greenberg, where Picasso’s work necessarily discovers the ‘notion of the sign as arbitrary’, producing an ‘art of the unmotivated sign’. Indeed, for Krauss, that it was ‘impossible for Berger to conceive of the rupture in Picasso’s art as coming in 1912, with the evidence of collage’ is evidence of the modernist nature of his understanding of Cubism, one which refuses to see in collage the ‘structural condition of *mise-en-abyme*’ the equivalent of which in the novel is the metafictional *mise-en-abyme* of works like Gide’s *The Counterfeiters*. Although intended as a criticism, this comparison shows that what is at stake in Berger’s account of Cubism, and the novel he would derive from it, is multiplicity rather than interdeterminacy, an attempt to think through forms of historicity rather than metafiction’s reduction of history to its signifiers.

This renewed interest in the transformed experiences of time, space, and thus history that capitalist modernity creates, and which modernist art tried to express, informed a number of Berger’s essays in the late 1960s, written while...
composing G. Explaining why Alexander Herzen’s liberalism did not speak to the political movements of the late 1960s, he claimed that Marx has shown that ‘[d]iscontinuity is now intrinsic to our view of reality’. Putting his earlier view of the temporality of criticism into practice, an essay titled ‘Past Seen from a Possible Future’ attempted to view the European tradition of easel painting in retrospect, drawing on Nietzsche’s claim—part of his critique of positivist historicism—that ‘[p]erhaps the past is largely undiscovered; it still needs so many retroactive forces for its discovery’. Walter Benjamin, according to Berger, offered a different critique of linear history, suggesting criticism as the recovery of past anticipations, with every object containing ‘a coded testament to the present’. An essay on mass demonstrations, responding to the protest movements of 1968, theorized their potential and limitations in terms of their disruption of time: their ‘prophetic, rehearsing possibilities’ lay in their ability to create in the present the kinds of political awareness and collective subjects located in the future. Yet the potential of such prefigurative politics was ambiguous. A long piece of reportage about the aftermath of the Prague Spring ventriloquized a critique of the Western New Left, with Berger recording the demand of activists that ‘the New Left ... distinguish between dreams and reality’, and offering a withering portrait of Western New Left radicals choosing individual consciousness-raising and dreaming over collective political action under concrete circumstances. At the same time, an introduction to a collection containing this essay stated that Berger had been working on a book set in 1900 without knowing ‘whether it will be eventually categorized as an essay, a novel, a treatise, or the description of a dream’, its generic instability potentially participating in those aspects of the New Left criticized in Czechoslovakia. In a 1968 essay on ‘The Changing View of Man in the Portrait’, Berger presented his theory of historical discontinuity and multiple perspectives as a solution to ‘the crisis of the modern novel’: ‘What this involves, fundamentally, is a change in the mode of narration. It is scarcely any longer possible to tell a straight story sequentially unfolding in time’. Rather than a novelistic event being a moment in linear time, ‘we are now aware of it ... as the centre of a star of lines’. G. is thus at the centre of a number of lines intersecting in Berger’s (p.123) work: a return to the revolutionary temporality and historicity of Cubism; a response to the perceived impasses of the New Left;
and a broader return in British avant-garde writing to the unfulfilled promises of modernism in response to a critical discourse on the decline of the novel.

G. tells the story of the life of its eponymous hero Giovanni, who later becomes simply ‘G’: the type character of the historical novel dissolving into a narrative cipher. It moves through a series of discontinuous episodes: G.’s birth in Livorno, his upbringing in fin-de-siècle England, his return as an adult to Italy, the outbreak of the First World War, and his death in Trieste. It is also episodic and discontinuous on a smaller scale, typographically consisting of short paragraphs with large section breaks. The overall effect is the narration of a life from afar, rather than from within. Episodes pass like the classic synecdoche for modernity’s transformation of time and space: the ‘views seen through the train window’ Giovanni experiences as a child as ‘distant, continuous, almost disembodied’. As with Janos in Hungarian, Giovanni is a translation of John; the novel ends in Trieste, where Berger’s father was born; and the text includes many passages copied verbatim from Berger’s criticism, for example the section on ‘The Situation of Women’. Like A Painter of Our Time, G. uses elements of auto/biographical writing and criticism to question generic conventions and expectations: in this case, those around the historical novel. This generic blurring is accentuated by the recurring metafictional reflections about the novel’s narrative form, as for example when the narrator admits his limitations: ‘What the boy says in reply I do not know. To pretend to know would be to schematize’ (51). Recalling the ‘necessity of uncertainty’ that marked Berger’s break from realism as a politics and aesthetics, these moments introduce indeterminacy and lacunae into the genre of the historical narrative, drawing on modernist narrative techniques to undercut its classical genre aims of presenting history as an unfolding totality.
A seemingly autobiographical metanarrative comment explains the central concern of the novel: ‘The way my imagination forces me to write this story is determined by its intimations about those aspects of time which I have touched but never identified’ (148). Echoing the preoccupation with the difference between clock-time and the experience of time found in modernist writers and theorists like Joyce, Woolf, and Bergson, the narrator states that ‘[t]ime is measured not by numerals on a clock face but by the incidence of our apprehended possibilities’ (50). And again: ‘Calendars and clocks are our inadequate inventions. The structure of our minds is such that the true nature of time usually escapes us’ (141). Yet G. (p.124) is interested not so much in what lies outside clock-time on the level of the individual day, the concern of much modernist fiction, than in other modes of historical time beyond the linear progression of the calendar: coincidences, anticipations, and retrospections that show history to be more than a process of linear progression. These disruptions of linear time can cut through or across time, drawing connections diachronically or synchronically. As a child, G is caught up in the 1898 workers’ uprising in Milan, about which the narrator reflects: ‘Every ruling minority needs to numb and, if possible, to kill the time sense of those whom it exploits by proposing a continuous present … The barricades break that present’ (72). If the failure of this uprising is expressed in the transcribed graffiti ‘KARL MARX HAS BEEN RELEGATED TO THE ATTIC, Giolitti in 1911’, with these echoes of Berger’s account of the temporal politics of 1968, the novel connects moments of revolution across time beyond that of merely failed repetition. G. also makes synchronic connection in time:

But I have little sense of unfolding time. The relations which I perceive between things—and these often include causal and historical relations—tend to form in my mind a complex synchronic pattern. I see fields where others see chapters. And so I am forced to use another method to try to place and define events. A method which searches for co-ordinates extensively in space, rather than consequentially in time. I write in the spirit of a geometerian.

(137)
The ‘synchronic pattern’ into which G is plotted attempts to connect the structure of fin-de-siècle European history: British imperial expansion in Africa, the technological advance of the first flight across the Alps, workers’ uprisings in Milan. If this shows the influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose Mythologiques appear in a list of footnotes at the beginning of the novel, it also parallels the method by which Berger located the moment of Cubism in a similar moment of modernity’s structural convergence. This interplay between diachronic and synchronic connections produces a different mode of historical fiction, where the historical past and process never appears as complete totality: ‘Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one’ (113).

Berger’s statement that G. might be a ‘description of a dream’ points to another form of non-linear historical temporality connecting his novel to his theory of the moment of Cubism. While recounting the story of G’s cousin Beatrice in South Africa, the narrator reflects that ‘[t]here is a historical equivalent to the psychological process of repression into the unconscious. Certain experiences cannot be formulated because they have occurred too soon’ (104). In this highly allusive novel, this is a reference to the Freudian concept of Nachträglichkeit, a difficult-to-translate term (p.125) meaning afterwardness, delayed action, as well as retrospective activation. While never explicitly worked out as a concept in Freud’s work, Jacques Lacan drew glancing but important attention to an aspect of Nachträglichkeit apposite to Berger’s allusion: that it is not a question of ‘biological memory’, but ‘of remembering, that is of history’; that it is a reordering of ‘past contingencies by conferring on them the sense of necessities to come, such as they are constituted by the scant freedom through which the subject makes them present’. Lacan also suggested its workings were most fully traced in the most literary of Freud’s case histories: his account of the Wolf Man. In a manner much clearer in the original German, Freud repeatedly conceptualizes the relationship of the Wolf Man’s dream to the primal scene in terms of Nachträglichkeit. The dream involves ‘nachträgliches Verständnis’ (‘understanding … [that] was deferred’) and ‘eine nachträgliche zum Verständnis vordringende Bearbeitung der so empfangenen Eindrücke’ (‘a deferred revision of the impressions so received to penetrate the understanding’). The dream-work is a ‘nachträglichen Wirkung’ (‘deferred
operation’) precipitating the ‘Aktivierung des Bildes, das nun
dank der vorgeschrittenen intellektuellen Entwicklung
verstanden wurden kann’ (‘[t]he activation of the picture,
which, thanks to the advance in his intellectual development,
he was now able to understand’). Attempting to describe the
narrative form of the account he is giving of this complex
temporality of delay and retroaction, Freud takes up the
analogy of relations in a visual field. After an original
‘Aufsplitterung’ (‘splinter[ing] up’) of the Wolf Man’s
perception so that ‘Szene wirkt nachträglich’ (‘[t]he effects of
the scene were deferred’), Freud’s investigation requires
piecing back together the splintered fragments, and this task,
he writes, ‘which is not difficult in other respects finds a
natural limit when it is a question of forcing a structure which
is itself in many dimensions onto the two-dimensional
descriptive plane’. Nachträglichkeit cannot be shown in a
linear narrative, and the closest model Freud imagines for
representing its effects across discontinuity is the
representation of multiple dimensions on a two-dimensional
plane: an uncanny anticipation of Cubism.
G. expands this structure of psychic temporality to history, and in this novel, a revolutionary modernism is the event that has ‘occurred too soon’. In 1956 Berger had already argued, as in the temporality of Nachträglichkeit, (p.126) that Cubism was a moment that had occurred too soon and was already a displacement and substitution: ‘Because they did not see how to make a revolution in the streets, they made one on their canvases’. G. extends this belief to a broader understanding of modernism. George Steiner, who along with Elizabeth Bowen was on the committee that awarded G. the Booker Prize in 1972, admitted that the novel is ‘a highly literary—indeed precious—affair, with plainly recognisable roots in the tradition of modernist fiction. It directs us to Italo Svevo’s Confessions of Zeno and Robert Musil’s Man without Qualities’.98 One of G’s lovers is a reader of Mallarmé, whose poems enclose G’s love letters, and the novel ends with two allusions to Joyce: G’s death in Trieste in the year Joyce was forced to leave the city, the novel ending when Ulysses was beginning, and the epigraph ‘Geneva. Paris. Bonnieux. 1965–1971’. True to the intricate logic of Nachträglichkeit, the novel does not simply set out to recover a putative unfulfilled potential of modernism. Its self-reflexivity about how its own historical position after the New Left and 1968 inflects its historiography of the early twentieth century makes the novel’s form one of Nietzsche’s ‘retrospective forces’ recovering an aspect of the past brought to light for the first time in this moment. ‘Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one’ (113); if this is the kind of historiography G. proposes through its rupturing of linear historical time, it is also Berger’s historiography of modernism: never a single story, but always one of revision and reconstruction.
G.’s meditation on its relationship to modernism, and its attempt to theorize that relationship and give it narrative form, makes it a self-reflexive commentary upon the wider re-investigation of modernism that took place in British fiction in the 1960s and early 1970s and whose representatives were noted by B. S. Johnson in 1973: ‘Samuel Beckett (of course), John Berger, Christine Brooke-Rose, Brigid Brophy, Anthony Burgess, Alan Burns, Angela Carter, Eva Figes, Giles Gordon, Wilson Harris, Rayner Heppenstall’.\footnote{99} If this phase has only recently come into view as a distinct moment in the history of the postwar British novel (previously overshadowed by the marketing of the 1980s Granta generation), this perhaps stems from a renewed interest in theorizing modernism’s development across the twentieth century beyond the historicist contextualizations that characterize the ‘new modernist studies’.\footnote{100} Berger’s own turn to Nachträglichkeit anticipates influential attempts in art history to rethink the relationship between earlier and later versions of modernism. For example, Hal Foster has \footnote{(p.127)} argued that ‘historical and neo-avant-gardes are constituted in a similar way, as a continual process of protension and retension [italics original]’, and, echoing Berger’s terminology, that ‘the avant-garde work is never historically effective or fully significant in its historical moments’.\footnote{101} More recently, Peter Bürger has revised his original theory of the avant-garde away from a simple linearity, according to which postwar avant-gardism is doomed to mere repetition of the radical gestures of previous generations, arguing for the necessity of ‘the use of deferred action as a general category of reflection’, where ‘the second event, which possesses its own context of emergence, illuminates the first’.\footnote{102} Appropriately enough, such work illuminates Berger’s own attempts to conceptualize modernist art works as those which ‘occur too soon’, and whose meaning can only be grasped by retrospective reactivation, evidence that modernism is still, as Berger wrote of Cubism, ‘defining desires which are still unmet’.\footnote{103}
The Moment of History

G. and the ‘moment’ of Cubism transcended the opposition with which Berger’s writing on art began in the Cold War (indeed, which was a product of it): between art as determined by its immediate context, or as an objet d’art divorced from history. Instead, the interchange opened up by his generic blurring between art criticism and fiction, between Cubism and the New Left, enabled a view of the novel as never merely the expression of its historical context of emergence, or as understandable apart from it, but as something whose forms can connect historical moments across and beyond linear notions of progress and teleology. G. marked the conclusion of this re-engagement with modernism, with Berger’s attention turning to the broader question of ‘the meaning and enigma of visibility itself’. However, his turn towards theorizing the impact of photography shows the continuation of his attention to the question of temporality first raised by his writings on Cubism. A 1972 essay on Paul Strand states that ‘[t]he ideal of photography, aesthetics apart, is to seize an “historic” moment’, and throughout Berger’s writings on photography in the 1970s, the ‘moment’ is used repeatedly to theorize how photographic temporality opens up different models of historicity and remembrance. Photographs of ‘moments of agony—a terror, a wounding, a death, a cry of grief’, for example, trigger not just a sense of shock and discontinuity, but also a more complex anticipation of the ‘discontinuous ... experience of time’ they record, so that viewing a photograph becomes a moment of remembering anticipation and anticipating remembrance. In an essay dedicated to Susan Sontag’s writings on photography, Berger wrote of how photography was transforming ‘the faculty of memory’, and in doing so, revealing how ‘[m]emory implies a certain act of redemption’. But if ‘[p]hotographs are relics of the past, traces of what has happened’, it is also ‘just possible that photography is the prophecy of a human memory yet to be socially and politically achieved’. ‘The task of an alternative photography’, Berger wrote in 1978, ‘is to incorporate photography into social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any memory’. Unlike many subsequent theorizations of photography as a form of trauma or spectral haunting, where photography only returns the past to the present, Berger’s criticism grasps the other side of this effect: the photographs are also prophecies of a future to come.
The essays collected in About Looking (1980) were part of a wider expansion of the theory and criticism of photography in the 1970s beyond the technical and often partisan writings of practising photographers. As W. G. Sebald recalled in 2001: ‘In the ‘70s there were very interesting things written about photography by Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, John Berger. I felt a direct rapport with things said in these essays’. Sebald owned a copy of About Looking, and it is not difficult to see how Berger’s reflections upon the relationship between photography, temporality, and memory were taken up in Sebald’s subsequent work. Berger’s collaborative works with Jean Mohr such as A Fortunate Man (1967) and A Seventh Man (1975), which incorporate photographs into discursive essayistic narratives, stand as Anglophone precursors to Sebald’s own genre-blurring works. Sebald also extended, although perhaps less consciously, Berger’s exploration of Nachträglichkeit as a mode of narration, particularly in The Emigrants (1993) and Austerlitz (2001). This use of Berger brings out an unexpected line of continuity between the multiple perspectives of modernist fiction and the turn towards autofictional and historiographical modes that increasingly defined fiction in the last decade of the twentieth century, a turn which was also, as Sebald’s work shows, another chapter in the postwar novel’s engagement with visual art.

Notes:

(1) John Berger, ‘The Unknown Political Prisoner’, New Statesman & Nation, 45/1150 (1953), 338

(2) John Berger, And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief As Photos (London, 1984), 51


(9) John Berger, ‘Present Painting’, *New Statesman & Nation*, 42/1080 (1951), 560

(10) John Berger, ‘Brobdingang’, *New Statesman & Nation*, 41/1060 (1951), 744


(13) Frederick Antal, *Florentine Painting and Its Social Background* (Cambridge, MA; London, 1986), 4


(22) John Berger, ‘The Biennale’, *New Statesman & Nation*, 44/1113 (1952), 12


(25) Stephen Spender and Irving Kristol, ‘After the Apocalypse [Editorial]’, *Encounter*, 1/1 (1953), 1


(33) Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (Manchester, 1994), 7


(42) ‘100,000 March in Hungary: Mixed Motives at Rallies’, Daily Worker, 24 October 1956, 1.


(45) Peter Fryer, ‘Reports Were Not Published’, Daily Worker, 16 November 1956, 1.


(54) Julian Spalding, *The Forgotten Fifties* (Sheffield, 1984), 38


(56) Peter de Francia, ‘Commitment in Art Criticism’, *Universities & Left Review*, 1/1 (1957), 50

(57) John Berger, ‘Wanted: Critics’, *Universities & Left Review*, 1/2 (1957), 41; 44


(64) Maurice Blanchot, ‘La Fin de la philosophie’, *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 80 (1959), 286–7


(66) Blanchot, ‘La Fin de la philosophie’, 278.


(74) V. Ivasheva, ‘Revisionism of Marxism in Britain’, *The New Reasoner* (1958), 147

(75) James, *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel*, 78-80.


(79) Perry Anderson, ‘Components of the National Culture’, *New Left Review*, 50 (1968), 13


(85) David Cottington, *Cubism and Its Histories* (Manchester, 2004), 165–96

(86) Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighten, eds., *A Cubism Reader: Documents and Criticism, 1906–1914* (Chicago, IL; London, 2008), 76; 257; 647

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(89) Rosalind E. Krauss, The Picasso Papers (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 217–18

(90) Nietzsche Friedrich, The Gay Science, ed. by Bernard Williams (Cambridge, 2001), 183

(91) John Berger, Selected Essays and Articles: The Look of Things (Harmondsworth, 1972), 85; 213; 87; 247


(96) GW 12, 144; SE XVII, 109.

(97) GW 12, 103; SE XVII, 72.


(99) B. S. Johnson, Aren’t You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs? (London, 1973), 29


