

Visual evidence: *A Seventh Man*, the specified generalization, and the work of the reader

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How do photographs provide evidence for social science arguments? Analysis of A Seventh Man, a book about migrant labor in Europe, by John Berger and Jean Mohr, suggests that they do this by providing specified generalizations, which state a general idea embodied in images of specific people, places, and events.

AN INSTRUCTIVE PRELUDE

April, 1964. Marjorie Mann, a then well-known San Francisco art critic who often wrote about photography, published a very positive review of an exhibit in which two well-known Northern California photographers, Pirkle Jones and Ruth-Marian Boruch, dealt with the economic and social decline of a small Northern California town (Mann 1964a). The show contained many touching photographs of Walnut Grove's deserted downtown, the empty streets, the boarded-up store fronts, the few elderly people who remained, shacks, weeds. Mann praised what she saw: "Not since 'Death of a Valley,' which Pirkle Jones created with Dorothea Lange, has San Francisco seen such a thoroughly competent display of unpretentious photojournalism used to tell a simple, honest story."

A later issue of the magazine carried an irate letter:

Last Sunday ... we found ourselves on a back road between Sacramento and Stockton, and, having seen Pirkle Jones's and Ruth-Marion Boruch's photographic essay on Walnut Grove, and having read the glowing review of the show in the May ARTFORUM, we decided to make the side trip of a few miles to look at Walnut Grove for ourselves.

Jones and Boruch told a heart-rending story of a dying community, a little world bypassed by the vagaries of progress, a town with old, dilapidated buildings and old people who stayed there only because they had nowhere else to go, although the young people were all departing. And a pathetic story it was. It brought a touch of moisture to the eye, a slight quiver to the lip ...

We first saw the pockmarked building of the Bank of Alex Brown, with chipped gold letters on the windows, and we felt a pride of recognition. But what was that? About a hundred yards south, there was a large airy building, a new Bank of Alex Brown to replace outdated facilities. Startled, we asked each other if small private banks would invest so much money in expansion in a community where everyone was going away.

And the letter went on like that. There was a small business street, but it wasn't deserted; the businesses were quite active and, besides, there was another street, a block away, with busy automobile showrooms, filling stations, bars, stores, and even: "... in an area almost deserted by farming, according to Jones and Boruch, a branch office of the State Department of Agriculture." More: the residential areas were thriving, not filled with shacks and weeds; there were even what could be called mansions, with groves of fruit trees, and a new community church. The letter's author concluded that the "story, which your reviewer had foolishly called 'simple' and 'honest' was a patent photographic falsification, a grim fairy tale, and the implications of this type of editing-to-prove-a-point are far reaching in the world of responsible photojournalism."

The correspondent goes on to consider how this falsification could have come about, compiling the standard catalogue of worries about photographic evidence that many learned scholars and critics have accustomed us to, tied in this case to the specifics of Walnut Grove:

... [W]as the story photographed so long ago that the town has vitally changed direction? Then the true story of Walnut Grove would be the story of the reversal of fortune. Did they spend too little time in the town? Were they such poor observers that they didn't see the new bank and the new community church? Did they go to Walnut Grove with a rigid idea of what they were going to see and then make only those photographs which

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exemplified their preconceptions? Were they over-impressed with the weathered visages of persons and places, confusing seediness with SIGNIFICANCE?

...As to your review, which I have reread with increasing amusement, your too-trusting reviewer has been HAD.

The irate reader who had thus been taken in is revealed, by the letter's signature, to be the "too-trusting reviewer" herself, Marjorie Mann (Mann 1964b).

This little story makes explicit, far better than any lengthy theoretical discourse, what is at stake in discussions (of which there are now hundreds) of the "truth" of photographs. On the one hand, everyone knows (not just learned critics) that photographs can be very misleading. On the other hand, everyone also knows what learned critics are often loath to admit but which their own practice always reveals: that we all trust, to some degree, the evidence we see in a photographic image. We know the images are constructed, that they can be made to "say" almost anything we want them to, and we also know that in our daily lives we look at photographic images and think (and we aren't wrong) that we have learned about something beyond the photographer's ideas and beliefs.

Talking about photographs as "evidence" lets us leave this philosophic muddle about "truth" and talk more realistically and reasonably about what photographs can actually do for social science arguments.

A Seventh Man

A Seventh Man, John Berger and Jean Mohr's well-known book on migrant labor in Europe (Berger and Mohr 1982 (1975)), can be seen, not unreasonably, as a work of social science. It makes an analytic argument about the organization and functional significance of migrant labor for host countries, labor-exporting countries, and for the migrants themselves. It provides solid textual and photographic evidence for that argument. The photographs seem unquestionably to contribute to the argument's credibility. So the book seems to have solved the problems of photographic credibility conspicuously not solved in the minor contretemps over Walnut Grove. How does it do that? How do the photographs in *A Seventh Man* provide solid evidence?

A Seventh Man contains several kinds of exposition: poetry (which, in my view, contributes least to the credibility of the whole); the narrative of "He," an archetypal migrant laborer, told in great detail, all of it meant to be, and for the most part successful in this, both specific and generic (making us wonder how this is achieved); statistics about migrant labor: popula-

tion, origins, accidents at work, and other relevant matters; some generalized Marxist theory about capitalist development, the relations of developed to underdeveloped countries, and the exploitation of migrant labor; and photographs, which are not referred to or explained or analyzed in the text, but rather presented as making their own statement. The photographs seem to work mostly like the story of He, as a kind of specified (or embodied) generalization, if I can use such an oxymoron, which I'll explain shortly.

Berger has explained elsewhere how the photographs work in his several joint efforts with Mohr:

In this book we have built a sequence of ... a hundred and fifty images. It is entitled 'If Each Time - '. Otherwise there is no text. No words redeem the ambiguity of the images. The sequence begins with certain memories of a childhood, but it does not then follow a chronology. There is no story-line as there is in a *photo-roman*. There is, as it were, no seat supplied for the reader. The reader is free to make his own way *through* these images. The first reading across any two pages may tend to proceed from left to right like European print, but subsequently one can wander in any direction without, we hope, losing a sense of tension or unfolding. Nevertheless we constructed the sequence *as a story*. It is intended to narrate. What can it mean to assert this? If such a thing exists, what is the photographic narrative form? (Berger and Mohr 1982:284)

He goes on to explain, more complicatedly than this, that while there is a narrative, the piece does not have a narrative form. Each image has an attraction to the one before it, the one after it, and to others in the sequence. So the word "sequence" is confusing, here and in Nathan Lyons' well-known usage as well, since neither the actual physical sequence nor the temporal sequence of viewing are crucial. Rather, they intend the reader to keep all the images in mind, seeing the connections of each to some or many or all of the others as they revolve around whatever the substance of the material is. Berger speaks of "the stimulus by which one memory triggers another, irrespective of any hierarchy, chronology or duration." And says: "In fact, the energy of the montage of attractions in a sequence of still photographs destroys the very notion of *sequences* - the word which, up to now, I have been using for the sake of convenience. The sequence has become a field of coexistence like the field of memory" (1982:288).

In such an situation of making and reading photographs, the viewer becomes an active participant, not just the passive recipient of information and ideas

constructed by an active author. By selecting the connections to be made from the very many that could be made between the images in any sequence of richly detailed photographs, the viewer constructs the meanings that form the experience of the work. In this living “context of experience ... *their ambiguity at last becomes true*. It allows what they show to be appropriated by reflection. The world they reveal, frozen, becomes tractable. The information they contain becomes permeated by feeling. Appearances become the language of a lived life” (1982:289).

The photographic sequences in *A Seventh Man* embody what I just called specified generalizations. The neologistic attempt to settle the questions of photographic truth is not, I hope, just a verbal gimmick. The idea is simple.

Photographs, as Berger insists, are irredeemably specific. The image is always of someone or something specific, not an abstract entity or a conceptual creation. You cannot photograph capitalism or the Protestant Ethic, only people and things who, it might be argued, exemplify or symbolize or embody these ideas. The migrant laborers in these photographs – lined up for their medical examinations, congregating in the railroad stations of German cities on Sundays to meet countrymen, leaving their Turkish (or Italian or Greek or Yugoslavian) villages for those German (or Swedish or French or Belgian) cities – are real people. They come from a specific real village and have gone to a specific real Northern European industrial city to work and to live in specific real barracks and work in specific real factories.

But we do not know their names or exactly where they come from. You can look in the “List of Illustrations” in the back of the book to find out where this or that picture was made (a Sicilian village or a factory in Lyons), but that’s a distraction. It doesn’t help your understanding of the book’s argument to know those things. The captions attest to the “reality” of the images, to their having been made in real places all over Europe and the Near East (no one would go to all the trouble of faking so many settings, we think to ourselves). But Berger and Mohr put the images to a specific use, and it is not the conventional documentary one of embodying a very general idea like “the dignity of man”. They mean the images to specify or embody not just an idea, but a connected and coherent argument.

The images, then, are evidence. They are specific instances of the general argument. They do not “prove” the argument, as we might expect a scientific proof to do, but rather assure us that the entities of the abstract argument, the generalized story, really exist as living people who come from and work in real places. This is not evidence as “compelling proof,” but rather as what is sometimes called an “existence” proof, a showing that the thing we are talking about is possible.

Evidence of this kind must be handled with all the care and suspicion we bring to bear on other kinds of social science evidence. That’s the relevance of the story of Walnut Grove. Jones and Boruch committed a simple sampling error, letting their choices of what to photograph and exhibit be dictated by a romantic idea that a more detailed look would not support. Berger and Mohr present enough material, verbal and visual, that it is hard to imagine that another reality sits just down the street contradicting the argument they make. Their pictures not only come from many places but, more importantly, show us enough aspects of situations, enough parts of a long story, as to convince us that nothing relevant to the case has been left out.

The ideas Berger and Mohr’s images embody are contained in the wealth of text that surrounds them: the story of He, the statistics, the theory of capitalism. The stories, ideas, statistics, and images are so intricately interlaced that it’s hard not to do violence in summarizing an arbitrarily delimited example – the segment dealing with the train trip from the village to the host country and the arrival at the station – for explication. It’s an “arbitrarily delimited” segment in that it has intimate and unbreakable connections to the preceding segments which deal with the situation in the home village and country, the preparations for the trip, the role of returning migrants in whetting others’ hunger for the money and other advantages the trip abroad will bring, etc. Here are the images:

1. (61) Men stand on one side of a chicken-wire fence, one of them leaning over the top to kiss a woman, another holding his arms out to someone on the other side who we don’t see. Others cluster on both sides of the fence. The leaving men wear suit jackets, the women wear head scarves.
2. (62) A crowd of women, many in head scarves, push up against some sort of barrier. On the facing page.
3. (63) A woman in modern dress (slacks and a striped turtle-neck, with a contemporary bag over her shoulder) is on the “leavers” side of the chicken-wire. She looks away from the traditionally dressed women on the other side, but it’s not clear where she’s looking. Her expression might be called “anguished.”
4. (65) The corridor of a European-style railway coach. A man sits on his suitcase in the corridor, wearing a knit turtle-neck sweater and a leather jacket. Other men behind him are sitting in the corridor; one is stepping out of a compartment.
5. (68–69) The railway station (in Geneva, we are told). The bulk of the frame is taken up with the railway yard: poles, rails, signals, switches. In the far background, a crowd of barely distinguishable

men with their suitcases huddle together, waiting to go through a door into a building.

6. (70) Some fifteen or twenty men, who seem to be in their twenties and thirties and also seem to be part of a larger group from which the framing of the image has separated them, crowd forward, one holding his passport up (the caption tells us this is Passport Control). They are dressed as we saw them in the station of departure: jackets, sweaters, but somehow looking (would we “know” this if we hadn’t already been told?) like the peasants we are sure they are.
7. (71) A postcard view of Geneva seen from the air or a tall building: a river, a bridge, trees, open air. (Not, of course, what the men saw when they got off the train.)
8. (72–73) The stairway from the railroad platform down into the station (we suppose). The men, carrying their bags, lit from above, are barely distinguishable. The one nearest us, and the largest in the image, is in shadow and his features cannot be seen. They are reflected in a large mirror which occupies the left half of the frame.
9. (74a) Some sixty or so men and two women crowd around a stairway going up at the right. A man in a white lab coat (a doctor?) guards the stairs, apparently checking papers before letting people through. The faces are barely distinguishable.
9. (74b) Some fifteen men are at several tables, some talking among themselves, others sitting alone, one with a cloth to his head. Beer bottles sit on the tables.
10. (75) Three of the men from the previous image, closer up. The man with the cloth to his head now leans on the table. One of the others, smoking, appeared in the previous image. The effect here is of a progressive close up, zooming in on the man with the cloth, who we might think is “suffering.” The three faces are easily “readable.”
11. (76–77) The men, the caption says, are leaving the Immigrant Reception Center for the city of Geneva. We look directly at them. Of the twelve or so faces in the frame, one is in sharp focus; one in front of him is quite recognizable, as is one alongside him; others are partially or not at all visible or not in focus. The expressions of the three men we can see are hard to characterize: the one in front seems, perhaps, apprehensive; the one behind him, in sharp focus, looks wary (perhaps we can say that, perhaps not); the one on the left seems perhaps apprehensive too. Or: all three look alert, waiting to see what will happen next.

Berger and Mohr do not say explicitly what the images show us, what they want us to see in them. They don’t make the connections between the ideas in

the text and these images explicit, nor do the two connect automatically. This is not like one of those scientific papers Bruno Latour has analyzed, in which each step in the argument and each possibility of error in the reasoning is made as explicit as possible, so as to channel the reader into agreement with the author. In such a paper, the reader may have to know a lot – perhaps know a vast technical vocabulary, a body of previous findings, methods of argument, methods of producing data – but the steps in the reasoning are explicit. What’s to be seen is pointed to – “note the markings on the butterfly’s wing” – as in Latour’s own paper on soil scientists in Brazil, where what he wants us to see is explained with each photograph.

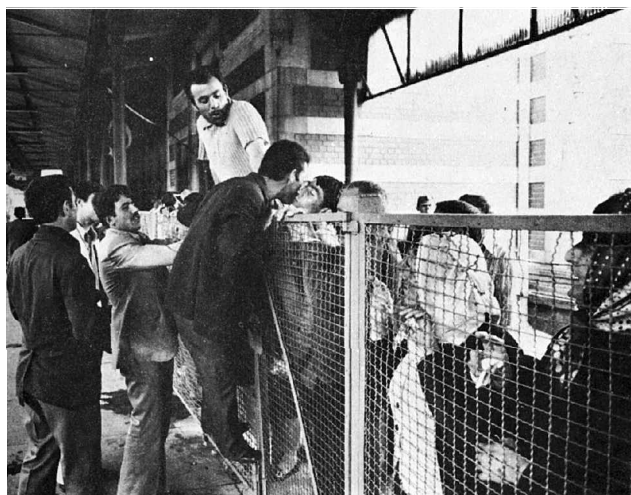
No. In *A Seventh Man* the authors present a lot of material and leave it to us to connect it all. Which is not as difficult as it sounds, but also not automatic. We might not make the connections they hope for and expect. We might not see the men walking down a stairway in what we are told is the Geneva railway station as migrant workers, though we probably would, but might well not see in them the specifics of the argument Berger and Mohr have already presented about people like them: “They look as though they are not using their eyes, and yet they are walking quickly” (66). Maybe. “In a group they arrive like a band. They tell each other by word and gesture that they are stronger and have more stamina and more cunning than the inhabitants of the foreign city” (67). Perhaps. But maybe not. These readings are not so obvious. We can imagine other reasonable possibilities.

The viewer has to do a lot of work to see them “not using their eyes”, and that points up what is distinctive about this use of visual evidence. The authors make explicit points (unlike, say, the implicit arguments Robert Frank makes in *The Americans*) but the images are not connected to them explicitly as an kind of evidence. They are just there, like the story of He, pieces to be shuffled around and combined by viewers to assess the argument, and deepen their understanding of it.

For instance, I might make the following out of this sequence, given the other information the text provides:

These men leave their villages because they have tired of working hard and getting nothing for their work. They go, as individuals, alone, to a place profoundly unknown to them, in the company of men who feel the same way, though they can’t be sure of that. They go to make the money that will improve their life back home, though they can’t be sure that will happen. They feel a sort of sympathy and comradeship with these men who seem to be like them, but don’t really

Berger and Mohr's images



1 (61)



2 (62)



3 (63)



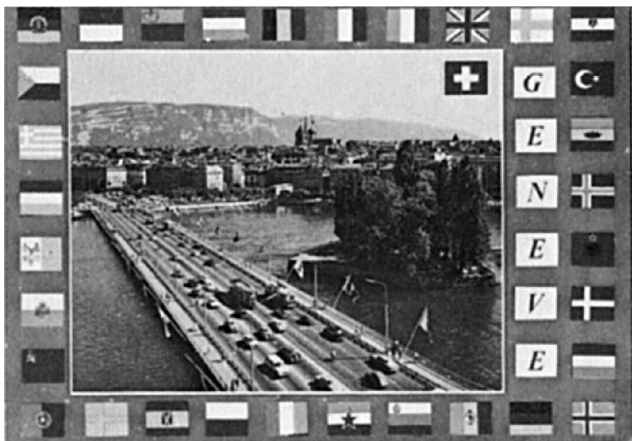
4 (65)



5 (68–69)



6 (70)



7 (71)



8 (72–73)



9 (74a)



9 (74b)



10 (75)



11 (76-77)

trust them. Collective action – a strike, let's say – will therefore be difficult and unlikely. They aren't ready to take advantage of the city's opportunities but will be marked by their knowledge of them when they go back home.

Where do I get all that from? In part from the text but in part, for instance, from the wary way they eye each other, guard their belongings on the train, relate to specific people in the crowd as they leave. They look to me like they are, in the words of an old song, "alone together." And I add all this to the explicit argument the book makes.

This "deepening of the understanding" of something being argued is an accomplishment often claimed for photography and here the images do that job. It is one thing to be told that the men look as if they are not using their eyes and quite another to have the wealth of information about the uses the men make of their eyes we see in the photographs. To be sure, this often means that we can disagree with Berger and Mohr about meanings, or add things they haven't said, but we can only do that because they have given us the material to do it with. Photographic images contain everything that went into their interpretation and much more that can be used to make alternative interpretations.

This kind of intensive viewing makes a peculiar feature of the book obvious. Its images differ remarkably from standard photojournalistic and artistic approaches to similar subject matter. Routine photojournalism, the kind you find in the daily newspaper, usually "personalizes" abstract issues, ties them to specific people. And the specific people are really specific: they have names (and you'd better spell their names correctly!), addresses, jobs, and are quoted saying something about their personal experience of the abstract phenomenon the story is "about." Better yet if you can "capture" this person in a vulnerable moment, crying perhaps, at least evincing some recognizable emotion.

A classier version of photojournalism, often found in better news magazines, sometimes epitomizes an idea in an image that is not specific in that way, but which stands for a kind of Everyman. You see this most clearly in photographs which sum up a situation, a war, a country in one stunning image of a napalmed baby or a rotting corpse or a starving child. Here the image is all abstraction, the specificity of the person or situation lost in its "universal" human meaning of loss or suffering. The ideas are not complex, have no theoretical context, make no complex argument. They produce sympathy for a suffering person rather intellectual understanding of a complex process.

Artists similarly individualize this kind of subject matter. Look at Paul Strand's images of Mexican peasants (and then of peasants in other parts of the world – Nigeria, Ireland, Egypt, New England) to see how it's done. Strand gives no names and addresses and, in any event, the people shown would not be easily identifiable because they are no one special. But he presents them in a kind of close-up that invites us to penetrate their minds and selves, to understand this particular person in his or her full human complexity. Strand makes use of what I've elsewhere spoken of as the theory of the portrait:

Portraits often contain a wealth of detail, so that careful study allows us to make complex and subtle readings of the character of the person and of the life-in-society of that person. Looking at the lines on a face, viewers may conclude that these were baked in during a life of hard work in the sun. From those same lines, they can infer wisdom produced by hard work and age or, alternatively, senility and decay. To make any of these conclusions a viewer must bring to bear on the image one of several possible theories of facial lines. (Becker 1986:303–304)

Strand's portraits of peasants – the same sorts of people Jean Mohr photographed for *A Seventh Man* – invite this kind of reading, a sentimental understanding of the unending fight for personal dignity inherent in the peasant life. Something like that.

Berger and Mohr's work, viewed in the perspective of either conventional daily photojournalism or conventional "artistic" renderings of similar material, is notable for its impersonality, for its lack of sentimentality. It does not personalize the "story" presented by the other materials, as a newspaper story would. We know no one's name or address, other than that they come from villages here and there in Southern Europe and the Middle East and have gone to Northern Europe to work.

In fact, the book deliberately mixes stories from many settings so that we see what they all have in common – the experience of leaving, going there, coming back – rather than the individual versions of them we know could also be shown. We are told to see all the villages – in Greece or Turkey or wherever – as the same and all the men who come from them to work elsewhere as the same, at least in the respects that matter for the overall argument. The book treats these men, then, as entries in a table, similar in the ways that count, just as a census treats people as the sum of the questions they have been asked and no more. (About which we qualitative types, by the way, usually complain.)

The book does not invite a deep reading of any of the individual lives we are introduced to. "He" is a

very abstract actor, who takes a lot of specific actions and to whom a lot of ideas and feelings are attributed. But they are all actions and feelings that could belong to any of the men, or none in particular. I don't say this in criticism. It is just the distinctive feature of this work. And it's what I meant earlier by "specific generalizations." The men coming out of the train into the Geneva station are real individuals, with real stories to tell, but we are not told them. We are told the general story of which they are instances, and they are given to us as just that, instances of a general argument. So, sympathetic as we surely end up being to the situation of these men, we cannot empathize in the deep way a Strand invites. We are not meant to. In this, Berger and Mohr embody the kind of artistic practice Berthold Brecht made famous, in which all the devices that dramatic artists usually use to grab our emotions are deliberately undercut and prevented from working, so that we may grasp the full weight of the political and sociological argument being made.

So: the images are specified generalizations, which invite us to generalize in the ways the text argues. They show us real instances of what the text talks about, with enough detail about the specific people and places we are looking at to let us make more or other interpretations. In that way, the

instances are both specific and general, abstract and concrete. Which answers the question often asked of people who use visual materials in their social science work: what can you do with pictures that you couldn't do just as well with words (or numbers)? The answer is that I can lead you to believe that the abstract tale I've told you has a real, flesh and blood life, and therefore is to be believed in a way that is hard to do when all you have is the argument and some scraps and can only wonder if there really is anyone like that out there.

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