

# The Creative Process

James Baldwin

Perhaps the primary distinction of the artist is that he must actively cultivate that state which most men, necessarily, must avoid: the state of being alone. That all men are, when the chips are down, alone, is a banality—a banality because it is very frequently stated, but very rarely, on the evidence, believed. Most of us are not compelled to linger with the knowledge of our aloneness, for it is a knowledge which can paralyze all action in this world. There are, forever, swamps to be drained, cities to be created, mines to be exploited, children to be fed: and none of these things can be done alone. But the conquest of the physical world is not man's only duty. He is also enjoined to conquer the great wilderness of himself. The role of the artist, then, precisely, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest; so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place.

The state of being alone is not meant to bring to mind merely a rustic musing beside some silver lake. The aloneness of which I speak is much more like the aloneness of birth or death. It is like the fearful aloneness which one sees in the eyes of someone who is suffering, whom we cannot help. Or it is like the aloneness of love, the force and mystery which so many have extolled and so many have cursed, but which no one has ever understood or ever really been able to control. I put the matter this way, not out of any

desire to create pity for the artist—God forbid!—but to suggest how nearly, after all, is his state the state of everyone, and in an attempt to make vivid his endeavor. The states of birth, suffering, love, and death are extreme states: extreme, universal, and inescapable. We all know this, but we would rather not know it. The artist is present to correct the delusions to which we fall prey in our attempts to avoid this knowledge.

It is for this reason that all societies have battled with that incorrigible disturber of the peace—the artist. I doubt that future societies will get on with him any better. The entire purpose of society is to create a bulwark against the inner and the outer chaos, literally, in order to make life bearable and to keep the human race alive. And it is absolutely inevitable that when a tradition has been evolved, whatever the tradition is, the people, in general, will suppose it to have existed from before the beginning of time and will be most unwilling and indeed unable to conceive of any changes in it. They do not know how they will live without those traditions which have given them their identity. Their reaction, when it is suggested that they can or that they must, is panic. And we see this panic, I think, everywhere in the world today, from the streets of New Orleans to the grisly battleground of Algeria. And a higher level of consciousness among the people is the only hope we have, now or in the future, of minimizing the human damage.

The artist is distinguished from all other responsible actors in society—the politicians, legislators, educators, scientists, et cetera—by the fact that he is his own test tube, his own laboratory, working according to very rigorous rules, however unstated these may be, and cannot allow any consideration to supersede his responsibility to reveal all that he can possibly discover concerning the mystery of the human being. Society must accept some things as real; but he must always know that the visible reality hides a deeper one, and that all our action and all our achievement rests on things unseen. A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven. One cannot possibly build a school, teach a child, or drive a car without taking some things for granted. The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides.

I seem to be making extremely grandiloquent claims for a breed of men and women historically despised while living and acclaimed when safely dead. But, in a way, the belated honor which all societies tender their artists proves the reality of the point I am trying to make. I am really trying to make clear the nature of the artist's responsibility to his society. The peculiar nature of this responsibility is that he must never cease warring with it, for its sake and for his own. For the truth, in spite of appearances and all our hopes,

is that everything is always changing and the measure of our maturity as nations and as men is how well prepared we are to meet these changes and, further, to use them for our health.

Now, anyone who has ever been compelled to think about it—anyone, for example, who has ever been in love—knows that the one face which one can never see is one's own face. One's lover—or one's brother, or one's enemy—sees the face you wear, and this face can elicit the most extraordinary reactions. We do the things we do, and feel what we feel, essentially because we must—we are responsible for our actions, but we rarely understand them. It goes without saying, I believe, that if we understood ourselves better, we would damage ourselves less. But the barrier between oneself and one's knowledge of oneself is high indeed. There are so many things one would rather not know! We become social creatures because we cannot live any other way. But in order to become social, there are a great many other things which we must not become, and we are frightened, all of us, of those forces within us which perpetually menace our precarious security. Yet, the forces are there, we cannot will them away. All we can do is learn to live with them. And we cannot learn this unless we are willing to tell the truth about ourselves, and the truth about us is always at variance with what we wish to be. The human effort is to bring these two realities into a relationship resembling reconciliation. The human beings whom we respect the most, after all—and sometimes fear the most—are those who are most deeply involved in this delicate and strenuous effort: for they have the unshakable authority which comes only from having looked on and endured and survived the worst. That nation is healthiest which has the least necessity to distrust or ostracize or victimize these people—whom, as I say, we honor, once they are gone, because, somewhere in our hearts, we know that we cannot live without them.

The dangers of being an American artist are not greater than those of being an artist anywhere else in the world, but they are very particular. These dangers are produced by our history. They rest on the fact that in order to conquer this continent, the particular aloneness of which I speak—the aloneness in which one discovers that life is tragic, and, therefore, unutterably beautiful—could not be permitted. And that this prohibition is typical of all emergent nations will be proven, I have no doubt, in many ways during the next fifty years. This continent now is conquered, but our habits and our fears remain. And, in the same way that to become a social human being one modifies and suppresses and, ultimately, without great courage, lies to oneself about all one's interior, uncharted chaos, so have we, as a nation, modified and suppressed and lied about all the darker forces in our history. We know, in the case of the person, that whoever cannot tell

**“Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war.”**

himself the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self. This is also true of nations. We know how a person, in such a paralysis, is unable to assess either his weaknesses or his strengths, and how frequently indeed he mistakes the one for the other. And this, I think, we do. We are the strongest nation in the Western world, but this is not for the reasons that we think. It is because we have an opportunity which no other nation has of moving beyond the old-world concepts of race and class and caste, and create, finally, what we must have had in mind when we first began speaking of the new world. But the price for this is a long look backward whence we came and an unflinching assessment of the record. For an artist, the record of that journey is most clearly revealed in the personalities of the people the journey produced. Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself and, with that revelation, make freedom real.

James Baldwin was a writer and the author of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), and *The Fire Next Time* (1963), among many other novels and essay collections. This text was originally published in *Creative America* (1962) and was later included in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (1998). It is reprinted here by arrangement with the James Baldwin Estate.

# Understanding a Photograph

John Berger

For over a century, photographers and their apologists have argued that photography deserves to be considered a fine art. It is hard to know how far the apologetics have succeeded. Certainly the vast majority of people do not consider photography an art, even whilst they practise, enjoy, use and value it. The argument of apologists (and I myself have been among them) has been a little academic.

It now seems clear that photography deserves to be considered as though it were *not* a fine art. It looks as though photography (whatever kind of activity it may be) is going to outlive painting and sculpture as we have thought of them since the Renaissance. It now seems fortunate that few museums have had sufficient initiative to open photographic departments, for it means that few photographs have been preserved in sacred isolation, it means that the public have not come to think of any photographs as being *beyond* them. (Museums function like homes of the nobility to which the public at certain hours are admitted as visitors. The class nature of the 'nobility' may vary, but as soon as a work is placed in a museum it acquires the *mystery* of a way of life which excludes the mass.)

Let me be clear. Painting and sculpture as we know them are not dying of any stylistic disease, of anything diagnosed by the professionally horrified as cultural decadence; they are dying because, in the world as it is, no work of art can survive and not become a valuable property. And this implies the death of painting and sculpture because property, as once it was not, is now inevitably opposed to all other values. People believe in property, but in essence they only believe in the illusion of protection which property gives. All works of fine art, whatever their content, whatever the sensibility of an individual spectator, must now be reckoned as no more than props for the confidence of the world spirit of conservatism.

By their nature, photographs have little or no property value because they have no rarity value. The very principle of photography is that the resulting image is not unique, but on the contrary infinitely reproducible. Thus, in twentieth-century terms, photographs are records of things seen. Let us consider them no closer to works of art than cardiograms. We shall then be free of illusions. Our mistake has been to categorize things as art by considering certain phases of the process of creation. But logically this can make all man-made objects art. It is more useful to categorize art by what has become its social

function. It functions as property. Accordingly, photographs are mostly outside the category.

Photographs bear witness to a human choice being exercised in a given situation. A photograph is a result of the photographer's decision that it is worth recording that this particular event or this particular object has been seen. If everything there existed were continually being photographed, every photograph would become meaningless. A photograph celebrates neither the event itself nor the faculty of sight in itself. A photograph is already a message about the event it records. The urgency of this message is not entirely dependent on the urgency of the event but neither can it be entirely independent from it. At its simplest the message, decoded, means: *I have decided that seeing this is worth recording.*

This is equally true of very memorable photographs and the most banal snapshots. What distinguishes the one from the other is the degree to which the photograph explains the message, the degree to which the photograph makes the photographer's decision transparent and comprehensible. Thus we come to little-understood paradox of the photograph. The photograph is an automatic record through the mediation of light of a *given* event: yet it uses the given event to *explain* its recording. Photography is the process of rendering observation self-conscious.

We must rid ourselves of a confusion brought about by continually comparing photography with the fine arts. Every handbook on photography talks about composition. The good photograph is the well-composed one. Yet this is true only in so far as we think of photographic images imitating painted ones. Painting, is an art of arrangement: therefore it is reasonable to demand that there is some kind of order in what is arranged. Every relation between forms in a painting is to some degree adaptable to the painter's purpose. This is not the case with photography. (Unless we include those absurd studio works in which the photographer arranges every detail of his subject before he takes the picture.) Composition in the profound, formative sense of the word cannot enter into photography.

The formal arrangement of a photograph explains nothing. The events portrayed are in themselves mysterious or explicable according to the spectator's knowledge of them prior to his seeing the photograph. What then gives the photograph as photograph meaning? What makes its minimal message—*I have decided that seeing this is worth Recording*—large and vibrant?

The true content of a photograph is invisible, for it derives from a play, not with form, but with time. One might argue that photography is as close to music as to painting. I have said that a photograph

bears witness to a human choice being exercised. This choice is not between photographing  $x$  and  $y$ : but between photographing at  $x$  moment or at  $y$  moment. The objects recorded in any photograph (from the most effective to the most commonplace) carry approximately the same weight, the same conviction. What varies is the intensity with which we are made aware of the poles of absence and presence. Between these two poles photography finds its proper meaning. (The most popular use of the photograph is as a memento of the absent.)

A photograph, whilst recording what has been seen, always and by its nature refers to what is not seen. It isolates, preserves and presents a moment taken from a continuum. The power of a painting depends upon its internal references. Its reference to the natural world beyond the limits of the painted surface is never direct; it deals in equivalents. Or, to put it another way: painting interprets the world, translating it into its own language. But photography has no language of its own. One learns to read photographs as one learns to read footprints or cardiograms. The language in which photography deals is the language of events. All its references are external to itself. Hence the continuum.

A movie director can manipulate time as a painter can manipulate the confluence of the events he depicts. Not so the still photographer. The only decision he can take is as regards the moment he chooses to isolate. Yet this apparent limitation gives the photograph its unique power. *What it shows invokes what is not shown*. One can look at any photograph to appreciate the truth of this. The immediate relation between what is present and what is absent is particular to each photograph: it may be that of ice to sun, of grief to a tragedy, of a smile to a pleasure, of a body to love, of a winning race-horse to the race it has run.

A photograph is effective when the chosen moment which it records contains a quantum of truth which is generally applicable, which is as revealing about what is absent from the photograph as about what is present in it. The nature of this quantum of truth, and the ways in which it can be discerned, vary greatly. It may be found in an expression, an action, a juxtaposition, a visual ambiguity, a configuration. Nor can this truth ever be independent of the spectator. For the man with a Polyfoto of his girl in his pocket, the quantum of truth in an 'impersonal' photograph must still depend upon the general categories already in the spectator's mind.

All this may seem close to the old principle of art transforming the particular into the universal. But photography does not deal in constructs. There is no transforming in photography. There is only decision, only focus. The minimal message of a photograph may be less simple than we first thought.

Instead of it being: *I have decided that seeing this is worth recording*, we may now decode it as: *The degree to which I believe this is worth looking at can be judged by all that I am willingly not showing because it is contained within it.*

Why complicate in this way an experience which we have many times every day—the experience of looking at a photograph? Because the simplicity with which we usually treat the experience is wasteful and confusing. We think of photographs as works of art, as evidence of a particular truth, as likenesses as news items. Every photograph is in fact a means of testing, confirming and constructing a total view of reality. Hence the crucial role of photography in ideological struggle. Hence the necessity of our understanding a weapon which we can use and which can be used against us.

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