A Critical Reflection on *Beyond Caring* by Paul Graham

Introduction

"*Of all the discordant visions of Britain produced during the 1980's by its new generation of photographers, the most unerringly true to its subject matter, the most consistently discomforting, and the most powerfully enduring is Paul Graham's* 'Beyond Caring'*.*" (Chandler, 2011[1])

This essay offers a critical discussion of the photojournalist collection entitled *Beyond Caring*, by Paul Graham (1986). The essay first provides an introduction to the work, and locates it within its sociocultural context. It then discusses the photography, editing, design, writing, context, and audience in the form of a critical narrative on the work as a whole. The essay closes with a short conclusion.

Background

Paul Graham was commissioned to present his "view of Britain in 1984." He was embarking on the early stages of his career at the time, having had only one previous publication, a self-published sequence entitled: *A1 – The Great North Road*, which was compiled between 1981 and 1982, and published in 1983. *A1 – The Great North Road* was described by Graham as being a portrait of the "kind of self-sufficient melancholy" of the people of Britain, who he viewed as operating along a

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[1] The majority of the quotes within this essay are taken from the *Books on Books* series, which features a facsimile copy of *Beyond Caring*. These copies do not have page numbers. However, the reader is directed towards the relevant texts in the reference section of this essay.

dichotomy of being both downtrodden and proud (Graham and Mack, 2009: 26). It was a text that aimed to look between the juxtaposition of the downtrodden and the pride in order to reveal a national integrity (Graham and Mack, 2009).

The twentieth century had been a complex time for Britain. Aside from the financial drain of the two world wars, the post-war years saw a gradual disentangling of Britain from its colonial interests. This disentangling was carried out in order to relieve the financial burden of maintaining the colonies, but the immediate result was a change in the presence of the UK on the international stage. According to MacPhee (2011), this resulted in a time of crisis for British identity. Even though financial hardships had been a longstanding element of British life, the post-war era saw this elevated to an augmented level in terms of its visibility. By the 1980's, the issue of finance had become critical, but concerns existed about the government's methods of approaching it.

Graham had shown in *A1 – The Great North Road* that he was not afraid of engaging with themes of poverty, desperation, and social inequality (Graham and Mack, 2009). Therefore, it is arguably surprising that his subsequent work, *Beyond Caring*, which was compiled between 1984 and 1985 and published in 1986, caused something of a controversy upon its publication. Graham's "view of Britain" is realised in the form of surreptitious photographs of nameless individuals waiting in various public spaces, including Social Security offices and Unemployment offices.

The 1980's were a time of considerable unemployment. In 1982, UK unemployment levels reached more than three million, the first time they had done so since the 1930's interwar years (Vinen, 2010). This meant that one in every eight people in Britain was out of work. This figure was not uniform: in Northern Ireland, for instance,

the out of work percentage stood at 20%. In Northern England the figure was 16% (Vinen, 2010). By this time, the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was being asked by the House of Commons to explain the government's position on the issue. When she addressed the Commons on 26th January 1982, she was persistently heckled, resulting in the need for the Speaker to intervene (Vinen, 2010). The then Labour leader Michael Foot stated that "there are 32 people chasing every vacancy" compared to the "five" who were chasing each vacancy when Thatcher came to power as Prime Minister in 1979. This was a significant increase, and a matter of deep concern. In particular, high levels of unemployment were not found throughout Europe: aside from Belgium, Britain had the highest jobless total (Vinen, 2010). Thatcher maintained that her stance concerning "hard economics," and a belief in personal responsibility, libertarianism, and pragmatism, was to the benefit of the country as a whole even if it meant that individuals struggled.

The jobless during the 1980's were not those with means or wealth. The main victims were those who worked in the traditional manufacturing industries that had initially given Britain its means to prosperity (Vinen, 2010). These tended to be working class people with few employment prospects outside their learned trade. With each mine closure or factory closure, entire villages and communities were instantly made redundant. By 1982, the dominant mood had turned from anger to being one of resentful acceptance. It is into this resigned sociocultural context that Graham's *Beyond Caring* is placed.

Beyond Caring

Beyond Caring is a photojournalism text in the loosest definition of the term. It is a book of pictures rather than words. Text is found in two forms: in the titles for each

image, which are blunt and factual; and in the occasional texts that are captured within the images. Plate sixteen[2], for instance, shows two cardboard signs with handwritten letters, one of which reads "BOXES – 1 – 16 – THIS WAY," and the other of which reads "PERSONAL ISSUES H – J". Plate seventeen shows a set of closed doors, with a handwritten sign that reads: "UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFIT surname's N – Z". Such bureaucratic text rendered on shabby cardboard or paper in handwritten script against sparse backgrounds recalls images from the Soviet Block, well-known for its social hardships. This forms a bleak juxtaposition of the supposedly first-world UK and the poverty within the USSR. As Hariman and Luciates (2007) explain, many photographs transcend the need for captions by forming such iconic associations.

The question of individuality versus society is another avenue explored in Graham's work (Chandler, 2011). In an interview for *Women's Own* magazine in 1987, Thatcher stated that "there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families," (Vinen, 2010, p.104). This sentiment appears to be strikingly resonant in *Beyond Caring*, albeit in a subjective manner. Thatcher's argument was based upon the presupposition that disconnectedness and individuality was in some way anti-nationalistic and unnatural. Within a Regan-esque paradigm, she seems to have understood the majority of economic problems as stemming from a bottom-up crisis of society rather than a top-down crisis of economic and social policy.

In Graham's photographs, however, individuals appear as disconnected, spectral subjects (Baer, 2002). There is an intense paucity of interaction, communication, or sense of a shared experience. Although the subjects mimic each other in terms of

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[2] Plates are taken from Ladd (2011).

their gloomy expressions and demeanours, there is a sense that each individual is introverted in their experience, haunting the present. Plate thirty-three is one such example. Four figures are present: a baby in a pushchair, and three adult males. All four subjects keep their distance from each other. Two males read newspapers, whilst the third is slumped on the floor. The third male is looking at the baby, but a gap remains between them, and the baby's eyes are focused on something beyond the angle of the camera. This disconnectedness is, I would argue, a central theme in *Beyond Caring.* There is not a single plate that manages to show significant interaction between subjects. Subjects repeatedly engage with other vehicles of communication, such as newspapers, magazines, and official notices, but even in more crowded spaces (such as that shown in plate twenty-nine), the majority of individuals seem to be locked in isolation. From this, the theme of isolation pervades the text.

In this way, the photography of *Beyond Caring* has captured a sparse internal landscape. Rooms are frequently empty, as individuals occupy one bench each. Hands are often locked away inside pockets, increasing the sense of isolation and internalism. Against them, the sparse and static rooms are vivid in their reds, greens, and yellows. They appear as rooms built for a purpose, but for which the purpose has been lost. According to Chandler (2011), the full effect of this juxtaposition is partly achieved as a result of New Colour photography, with which Graham was experimenting at the time.

Until photographers such as Graham began experimenting with colour, "real-life" was documented via the press in low-quality black-and-white images. NAME explains that the immediacy of colour photographs created not only a new way of understanding recorded reality, but a new appreciation of the photographic medium.

This move towards colour might be understood as being part of a broader wave within photography to use the captured image as a piece of fine art, in a direct dichotomy of the journalistic photograph. The tension between various cultural strata is exposed (Bordo, 1998).

The question of the veracity of photographs has long pervaded the artistic discipline (Bordo, 1998). Captured images raise multiple questions concerning issues such as integrity, reliability, and validity. By the 1980's, the media had already become a contentious institution. The Watergate Scandal in the US in the 1970's owed much of its outcome to the role of the media in the form of leaks, phone hacking, and photography. The power of the image had begun to be talked about, and the idea of the photographer as being a custodian of aftermaths rather than initial events had emerged. One of the ways that *Beyond Caring* addresses these issues is in its embrace of the documentary theme.

As Cooper and Hollows (2011) observe, *Beyond Caring* is an exploration of the 'documentary' genre. This might be observed as being an extension of the principle tropes of *A1 – The Great North Road*, which broke away from the dominant typology of the black and white image to investigate a more immediate visualisation of the contemporary landscape. The plates in *Beyond Caring* show the vivid reds of fire alarms, the blazing white of fluorescent lighting, the peel of gloss paint, and the scatter of brown cigarette butts against the blankness of magnolia walls and linoleum flooring. These pictures seem to be at once locked in history, whilst transcending temporality: they are accessible, yet remote. In this way, the documentary can be begun to be realised.

Beyond Caring is a documentary in that it claims to record the real life experiences of individuals. The message of reality is conveyed very clearly in the selection of photographs. This is partly due to the secretive nature of the pictures, within which no subjects are posed. In plate twenty-one, one woman appears to be talking, and her open mouth signifies animation, but a blonde head blocks any view of her companion. Such constructions are, in classical terms, inadequate and unstructured. The viewer is forced to fill in the blanks and form presuppositions about the nature of the interaction between the subjects in the picture. In this way, the genre of documentary is opened.

The documentary theme is continued in the structure of the photographic collection as a whole. The reader is presented with a sequence of images that are almost identical. Unnamed individuals sit slumped in chairs, chins resting upon hands, some heads bowed in newspapers and other heads resting on chests. Babies are strapped, static, into pushchairs. Lights blaze, signage peels, rubbish lingers. These images are repeated throughout the entire collection of pictures to the point that the viewer is overwhelmed with its repetitiveness to the degree that its veracity cannot help but be accepted.

This repetition is reinforced by the annotations for each picture, which are brief and formulaic. With abbreviations that invoke the jargon of the bureaucratic welfare system, the pictures are explained: Plate twenty-one. Waiting Room. Poplar DHSS. East London. 1985; Plate twenty-five. Old Man Being Interviewed. DHSS Office. Birmingham. 1984; Plate 16. Man with Dog. Hallway. Euston DHSS. Central London. 1985. The lack of any extraneous features, such as the time of day, the time of year, or the broader context of the picture or subjects, is entirely absent. The space

becomes the subject of the documentary investigation, and it is to this that the viewer's attention is directed.

Descriptive and artistic photography such as that found in *Beyond Caring* lends itself to deeper speculative analysis. Each plate could be analysed both in its own right and in terms of its inclusion of the sequence as a whole. For instance, plate sixteen shows two men waiting in the Euston DHSS. One man is black, and the other, whose head is down as he draws or writes in a book, is of uncertain race. On the wall behind him are seemingly political slogans that read, for instance, "Ulster Volunteer Force." The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) is a Northern Ireland Loyalist paramilitary group, which was engaged in armed campaigns during the 1980's. Against this message, a stereotypical institutional building is portrayed. Tan and black tiles and red fire doors invoke buildings such as schools, universities, hospitals, and government properties. Plate twenty-six is contrasted with others such as plate thirty-one, which shows a crowded room of mostly white individuals. Modern lights and modern windows spill light over the group. Plate thirty-two shows an ethnic woman with a young child sitting alone in a blue corridor that has the colour and texture of a hospital. All these people, with their different lives, are brought together by this documentary archive that equates them all in their positions of stasis and boredom.

The editing history of the pictures is not well known. It can be argued that the action of compiling an archive is in itself an act of editing, and that the portfolio itself survives as an edited act. Chandler (2011) describes how he is "struck again by how light and simply produced [*Beyond Caring*] is by today's increasingly lavish standards."

Speaking of the modern editions, Chandler explains that:

"*the book comes to us now as something of a memorial, not just to the time and the experiences so acutely rendered in the photographs, but to a longer period of transformation and disempowerment in the lives of working people in Britain*"

In this, Chandler seems to be discussing the phenomenon of memory politics. Memory politics were first explained by Freud, and then later by Nietzsche, who wrote that "only that which does not cease to hurt remains in memory." This complex statement has been explored by numerous scholars, but more so by artists. Artists who have lived and worked through times of trouble and unrest have embraced the idea of memory as being something that has the power to control, dominate, and destroy. Political systems such as those in the UK have a history of being able to re-write their actions. Cabinet reshuffles, resignations, and elections are all part of a process of constant re-writing and editing. The media, which keeps pace with the present rather than the past, often focuses attention upon the 'here and now' rather than the broader phenomenological scope. However, the photograph has the power to preserve trauma in the present (Baer, 2002). By creating a documentary archive, Graham has created an archival paradigm. *Beyond Caring* transcends the constant flux of daily politics to provide a preserved commentary, and an image with currency (Tagg, 1988).

In addition to this, it can be noted that there is the element of the short story (albeit unfinished and elliptical) about the images that combine to form *Beyond Caring.* For instance, plate thirty-seven shows a room dark against what may be a winter's evening, a gloomy summer's day, or a room whose light is blocked by a wall. A figure sits alone in the back corner, surrounded by empty cans and sweet wrappers.

He appears at first to be sunk into the same kind of depression as the man in plate thirty-four, but a closer inspection reveals that he is intently reading a newspaper. His clean clothes and neat hair make him seem well-kempt against the dirty backdrop. Against so many images of individuals waiting in line, this young man reminds the viewer that not everyone depicted in these photojournalist images is truly "beyond caring." Instead, he seems to be waiting for his opportunity. However, the majority of the story is unknown. Beyond plate thirty-seven having been taken in Brixton, South London, the viewer knows nothing about the story behind this individual.

This lack of knowledge on the part of the viewer is not dissimilar to the concept of the "Death of the Author" as written about by Barthes. Barthes argued that the true meaning of a piece of art or text is not found in the intention of the artist or author, but that it is rather found in the subjective position of the viewer or reader. In this way, there is no 'true' interpretation of a text or piece of art. Rather, a single piece has as many meanings as there are viewers. This then becomes a process of social exchange (Lowry, 2000). This, according to Aumont (1997), also becomes the power of the archive. Graham's photographs seem to deliberately leave space for speculation and interaction between the viewer and the image (Abercrombie et al, 1992). This is achieved in the form of faces turned away from the camera, impenetrable shadows, and closed doors, all of which are juxtaposed with glaring lights and bold colours. These colours draw the viewer into the space of the image, demanding the establishment of discourse between image and photographer.

Graham aimed to be subversive with this work. This is also seen in the journey from photograph to print, which was achieved via self-publishing under the Grey Editions imprint. Ladd (2011) explains that the choice to publish under an independent label

was performed in order to prevent the compromise of the artistic integrity, whilst enabling a young photographer to achieve a work of this scope and scale. The "Do It Yourself" ethos was a deliberate contradiction to the 1980's culture of anti-Capitalism (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007). This had its roots in Ralph Gibson and Lee Friedlander's legacies of founding independent presses. In addition to this, a Labour Party controlled funding body operating through the London Council gave funding to the work. This was a clearly political motive, with Labour politicians keen to promote any negative images of the Thatcher regime. As the images of *Beyond Caring* focus particularly upon those who were working class, the images had particular poignancy for Labour's anti-middle class manifesto. In this way, the journey becomes one of hidden travels (Bordo, 1998).

Conclusion

The sequence of pictures known as *Beyond Caring* can be said to be a unique work of photojournalism. Images and text are delicately intertwined through interlinked images in order to reveal truths about the sociocultural situation of Britain in the 1980's. Sparse backdrops with vivid colours are juxtaposed with the looks of boredom and despair on the faces of the subjects. The viewer is forced into a position of voyeurism as the unknown faces make endless lines for the dole queue. The sequence of interconnected images portrays a Britain that is uniform, but disillusioned. The bored and static subjects are literally "beyond caring" as they wait in uninspiring holding areas; the lack of text brings the viewer into direct contact with the individuals, removing the author from the picture and leaving the harsh colours of reality to endure.

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