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## **Leaving a space to listen: Working with John Berger on *Another Way of Telling***

### **Introduction**

In Spring 2021, during lockdown, I made contact with John Christie, film-maker and director of the TV documentary *Another Way of Telling*, screened on BBC in 1988. I asked him about how his work on the film had come about and the process of collaborating with John Berger and Jean Mohr. My interests in this subject were inspired by my own theatre practice of adapting Berger and Mohr's book for the stage. Following *A Fortunate Man* (2018) and *A Seventh Man* (2020), I was now in the process of making the final piece in *The Berger & Mohr Trilogy* based on *Another Way of Telling* – the book that was published in 1982 and the subject of John Christie's film. The following is the transcript of our conversation which took place via Zoom. Before the conversation took place John had sent me a copy of his film on DVD which I watched before we met.

### **Conversation**

**Michael:** Thanks so much for arranging to talk and also thank you for sending the DVD. I was really amazed to have the opportunity to look at that. I'm just on the last episode about just after they've spoken about *A Fortunate Man* and the picture of the doctor. There is so much material there and it's quite hard to digest it all in a short space of time, but thank you so much for sharing it and I will post it back.

**John:** Fine. Do make a copy of it. I'm quite happy for that.

**Michael:** Thank you. I'm not sure how I'll do that. I have new technology not old technology. I suppose I'd start by... Also, just to let you know, is it okay to record this?

**John:** Yes, sure.

**Michael:** Just so I have this as a record and what I might do with your permission is quote you in any writing about the project?

**John:** Yes. Fine.

**Michael:** So, articles or chapters, perhaps in future books that I'm working on?

**John:** Yes, sure.

**Michael:** Because I suppose I'm really exploring 'ways of staging' the work of Berger and Mohr, I'm using the term 'ways of staging' for obvious reasons, but I'm interested in how their work, their books, might be material that could be explored in performance. I've made performances about *A Fortunate Man*...

**John:** Yes, I've seen that one.

**Michael:** And *A Seventh Man*. Now, *Another Way of Telling*. And when I saw you on Instagram and noticed the connection, I was interested in your work on *Another Way of Telling* and specifically the film. But it seems, having watched it, most of it. The films span a wider territory.

**John:** Yes

**Michael:** You reflect upon their collaboration as a creative project, but also on the specific books that they'd worked on.

**John:** Yes

**Michael:** I'm interested in the notes that you shared with me that you wrote as well for Berger's biographer, Tom Overton. I know that those reflect a little bit on the process of making the film, but I wondered at what point you felt it was important to ask them to reflect upon their wider collaboration. Not just *Another Way of Telling*, that had perhaps sparked the idea for the film, but their other projects as well.

**John:** Well, I think that *Another Way of Telling* is a kind of moment in their friendship and their collaboration. And, of course, Jean Mohr's been engaged in many other projects of John. One way or another, he's been involved in quite a lot. It just naturally came about when we had them both together to spend some time talking about other things. I mean, for instance, I was very familiar with *A Fortunate Man*, but at one point in the filming, and you saw it I think, when they were looking through and discussing Jean's photos, John revealed that the doctor had committed suicide. I didn't know that was coming, I knew he wasn't alive, but I didn't know he had killed himself.

**Michael:** Yes

**John:** I remember it very distinctly. It was a real shock when they talked about it. John picked up that photo of the doctor standing in the doorway or about to go out of the doorway. And then he said to Jean Mohr, 'how do you feel about this now? Do you feel in any way responsible?'. I didn't know that was coming when they talked about that. And then Jean Mohr answered, 'No, no, I don't think so'. But I didn't know that later part of the doctor's story. I remember John said in the film, 'every suicide is an accusation'. I think this was something that emerged during their conversation, because we had the two of them talking together. I had four programmes to make and decided from the start to expand it beyond just *Another Way of Telling* to bring in their other books and collaborations together.

**Michael:** I have questions in response to that. One is, in those sections between John Berger and Jean Mohr talking in very close proximity between friends, I'm imagining that wasn't scripted.

**John:** No, it wasn't scripted, no.

**Michael:** You just filmed them in dialogue. Maybe they chose a box of photos to look at on the table. But I wondered if you could talk about how you set that scenario up?

**John:** Okay. I think what happened, it was a very collaborative process – working on the films. It was the first thing I directed. I had filmed on lots of different documentaries, but it was the first series I'd been given permission to direct. Of course, I was in new territory, and I wanted to do my best for John, he was one of my heroes and I wanted to make them good programmes. And, of course, it involved lots of talking together about the areas we were going to cover. When it came to, for instance, the scene you mentioned with the photographs, Jean Mohr would bring out a box of his pictures which were from *A Fortunate Man*. I didn't know what order they were going to bring them out of the box, nor did they, they were just reflecting on the images as they were taken out. So, I think that that picture of the doctor leaving the doorway, it was just a photo that Jean Mohr was happy to show and not necessarily put there as a kind of a trigger to bring the subject of the doctor's suicide up. Not at all, I'm sure. I think John would have warned me that there was a surprise coming, it was just something that happened when the photo appeared.

**Michael:** That revelation about the doctor only appears as a kind of Afterword in one of the later editions of the book which I think is after you shot the film. But also, that picture of the doctor leaving the house, I don't believe that's in the book. Well, if it is. It's very small. I've researched that quite extensively and I didn't recognise that picture. So, there's a lot of interesting revelations that I wondered about as well. Because you talk about the process of structuring the film in the notes that you shared. A certain kind of, I guess, trepidation about showing it to Berger and Mohr. But in a way, what you seem to have achieved is a really kind of beautiful, non-linear, fragmented, kind of a film that reflects the non-linear, fragmented nature of the book.

**John:** Yes, yes.

**Michael:** You can't tell a linear story about the book because it doesn't work in that way.

**John:** I think I mentioned in those notes that, in a funny way, when I was writing the notes, actually, I was very conscious of the fact that, and I'm not a control freak by any means, but I like things to be done as I would like them to be done. And I was completely, in a way, shocked at the time that John didn't want to see the films as I was editing the sequences together. He just let me get on with it. I mean, we did correspond, we did talk about things, but in general, he didn't see the sequences as I was working them. But in a way he guided me. I think I mentioned in the notes that he sent me a letter. He wrote: 'Let's make it and let's call it 100 postcards about photography' or some phrase like that. And that gave me that clue about how to make the four films. I edited the individual sections together and, as I did that, I wrote the title and timing of each discrete, edited sequence on index cards. I had the cards pinned on the wall all around me in the edit suite. I would have, say, *A Fortunate Man*, 'discussing the doctor' and it would say the running time was 3 minutes 20 seconds or something like that. And I would assemble the various film sections as a rough cut. I had all these cards up on the

wall around me to try and edit together the different threads of the story I was trying to tell e.g. John's photo theory, Jean and John working together and Jean Mohr's stories and anecdotes as well as what happened in the workshop in Finland. I was given permission in a way to jump around and the index cards helped me visualise that. It's always hard when I see films that people have made and they're too long. But there's always, with TV programmes, a set length, you are told for instance that each film has to be, say, 29 minutes 40 seconds or something like that and you have to make it that length. You can't say it's only 28 minutes. So, the fact is that there is still loads of stuff on those tapes that I've shot and recorded that have never made it into those four programmes. I had many more index cards as it were, of edited sequences than I finished up using in the final series. In the programmes each individual part of the overall story was of a different length and by using that method of working I was able to eventually get each programme to its correct length. I think the shortest part I put together is literally the photo that Jean Mohr took of the farmer dipping a stick into the petrol tank of the aeroplane when they were going up to shoot some aerial shots in Shropshire for the book. And John told that story, the farmer just dips this stick in the petrol tank, this stick he's pulled out the hedge. Then says 'Oh yeah, I think we've got enough', and that's it and they go off in the plane. It all seems very ad hoc but an illustration of how they worked towards *A Fortunate Man*. That short sequence was probably just 20 seconds and it was absolutely just a little anecdote that helped me out when I was making the programmes to length.

**Michael:** Just to say I noticed as well, the title cards, the captions that seemed to marry with the typography that was used on one of the earlier editions of the book. Is that correct?

**John:** I didn't consciously do that. I'm trying to think back now. I didn't consciously do that. I decided that each postcard should have a title.

**Michael:** How did you arrive at those titles? Were they derived from the book in some way?

**John:** I don't think so. I'm just thinking of what some of them were now. One section, *Amir*, for instance, is the photographic story about Jean Mohr's dog, a really lovely dog. And I remember arriving at Jean Mohr's house in Geneva and the dog opened the door! I mean, I rang the doorbell and the door opened, the dog had just reached out and pulled the handle down, the door came open and we were just faced with the dog standing there. He'd obviously done it many times before. It was his party trick. The dog's character reflected Jean Mohr's character. Jean was very easy to get on with. I'm sure, at times, although I didn't ever see it myself, but I'm sure at times he could be quite adamant about what he wanted to do. He was a very gentle person but obviously quite dogged (no pun intended) in what he wanted to do as photographers have to be. When John was adamant about a point Jean would generally give way. For instance, when he took the photos of the doctor to show John, and Jean himself told this story in the film, John said to him: 'No, these are no good. You've tried to do everything. You're trying to do my job and your job, and this is not good enough'. At this point Jean Mohr

was big enough to say 'Well, okay, you have the photos and you do it'. And he was happy for him to make the selection for the book.

**Michael:** There is that moment as well where Jean Mohr takes some pictures of you? I think. Later he says he had to ring John and ask him 'Are you okay?' because he looked concerned in the images. And that's also an interesting moment in the documentary where you reveal your own process. You reveal yourself. As the filmmaker.

**John:** Yes. It revealed myself to me at that moment, in the way that I was pretty nervous. That was not the first time I met John, but it was the first proper meeting regarding the film project, and we were going to start filming soon, I was, as I've said, quite nervous. I was there with Anna Ridley, the producer and John. Jean was covering the three of us with his camera. It was a serious meeting, John was rather pensive, and maybe his mood set the tone, I'm not sure. I included those photos because Jean talked about them and what the images revealed about John and the fact that he'd had a row, probably with Beverly, before he left home to come to the meeting with us showed on his face. I wouldn't normally put photos of myself in a film, but I think it was because Jean actually referred to those particular pictures, and the fact that photographs can reveal things that we can miss in real life.

**Michael:** What I'm asking, I guess, is this felt a little bit like nowadays when we might see a documentary film crew following a documentary film crew. So nowadays you might be more familiar with a film referring to its own process, but I wonder if, in the late 80s, that was quite a radical decision to make?

**John:** It wasn't made as a radical decision, it just fitted in with the film. Jean was talking about a meeting, there were two other people apart from John Berger in the meeting, who was looking as if he'd just had a row with somebody. Concerned about things. I would have been quite happy for it just be pictures of Anna looking concerned or nervous, I don't know, but it just happened. It just happened. Yes.

**Michael:** I have a question about when you're setting up the frame for the film, if you like, using images. Some of them are from the book, some of them are from other books. But also, there are sequences where John Berger just talks to camera. Or as a kind of direct address, like in *Ways of Seeing*, and then there are sequences with Berger and Mohr in dialogue not addressing the camera. Was it a conscious decision for you to have that mix of styles, a mix of addresses?

**John:** Well, I think if you look at Jean Mohr, he was always talking off camera in a quite conventional way. He was talking to Anna. I was behind the camera. He was talking to Anna. I'd written the questions out that I wanted him to talk about for her to ask those questions. Then if I had said, 'Can you look at the camera and just answer these things?' he would have been ill at ease, I think. But John was different, of course. Did you ever meet him?

**Michael:** No. I didn't.

**John:** He had the gift of being able to look straight at the camera and in doing so speak directly to the viewer as though across the table in, say, a café or bar. That's how he was in person. He wouldn't be looking over your shoulder to see if there was anything more interesting happening in the room. He would be completely focused on the person he was talking to, and he would listen, really carefully, as well. He was the same on and off camera. So, looking directly at the camera was his way, his visual trademark. There weren't many people who could do that convincingly, but that was how he was in real life. I took advantage of the fact that that was what he was good at, that's what people expected him to do. They would not have expected him, when it was just him on camera, to be looking off, talking to somebody off camera in the conventional way.

**Michael:** There's something as well about watching Berger think, the time he takes to articulate himself. And a lot of times people write about this space he made for listening, but also the space he made for thinking.

**John:** I like to think of John as leaving a space for listening.

**Michael:** That sounds like a good title. I feel like, a lot of the time, when it's him directly addressing the camera, we're watching him in the process of thinking things through.

**John:** Definitely.

**Michael:** Do you feel that when you're filming it? Do you feel like we're watching him think very carefully? It is interesting from a filming perspective because usually a presenter perhaps has a script and Berger works much more in an ad hoc way.

**John:** We worked out what was needed to be said, guided in many instances, by the text in the book. John would ask me how long I wanted the piece to camera to be and then he would rehearse it quietly to himself and then we'd go for a take. Lots of these segments were shot in Finland when we'd finished the workshop. The photographers had gone, and we had the site to ourselves. After each take, and we didn't do many takes of each piece, he'd ask how long it was and generally his timing would be very close to the length I'd requested. I was very determined in these programmes to look at photographs properly, but you discover that after four seconds on a photograph, (quite a long time in screen time), you want to, say, zoom closer into the image, but I was very determined not to do that, for the camera not to distract. And people said, 'the programmes are slow'. I said, 'but there's quite a lot to listen to, to take in'. I felt you didn't want the camera whizzing around all over the place and zooming in and out of the photos. You want to carefully look at the things you're talking about. I tried to do that as best I could.

**Michael:** When you're showing the images on screen. Sometimes it's a hand turning pages in a book. Sometimes it looks more like what we might call a jpeg now in the frame of the edit. What was the technology you were using to put photos into the TV programme?

**John:** I was actually just filming them on the camera. I had all the photographs, and I was just filming them directly on the camera.

**Michael:** Is that like a slow pan or zoom across the photo?

**John:** There were no electronic pans or zooms. I did it on the camera. I put the images up on an easel and filmed them.

**Michael:** That's amazing. I guess that's how documentaries would use images in that way.

**John:** I mean, what would have been usual at that time in the late 1980s would have been to go to what they called a rostrum-camera studio. And there were places, quite a few places, in Soho especially, where you could take the captions or take the photos or whatever. You would say to the rostrum cameramen: 'Let's start with the wide shot and then move into that section over, say, five seconds. And they would actually film that for you. The cameraman would set the beginning point, the wide shot, set the end point, and then the length of the shot. It would be very, very well done but it was an expensive process. That was what I was trying to do by filming the photographs myself, to duplicate the rostrum camera set-up, but avoid the cost of someone doing it for you. That would cost quite a lot of money. There was a very famous rostrum cameraman called Ken Morse, there was even an *Arena* programme made about him because his name appeared on many programme credits and people would often say 'Who's Ken Morse?' He also kept a large parrot in his studio – so he was famous on two counts!

**Michael:** I wanted to ask: When Berger's in a classroom, when he's in a lecture theatre with the students in Finland. I think you write about this in your notes. He really comes to life in those moments...

**John:** Yes, he was great, the whole thing was great.

**Michael:** He actually speaks and thinks so much quicker than when he's doing the pieces to camera.

**John:** Yes, he was thinking on his feet. Faced with all those photographers, different sorts of photographers, landscape, press etc. There was one guy who everyone called the 'Forest Philosopher' because he used to go off into the middle of nowhere for weeks and weeks with an enormous plate camera and tripod and take these deserted landscape photographs of the tundra. There were others who were commercial, advertising photographers. So, there were all different sorts and most of them spoke quite good English. They were generally very quiet and attentive in those classes (not so quiet at night) and that was to do with listening to John. He'd set them the task of producing photographic sequences that didn't require a text explanation. We later gathered together, and the pictures were projected for everyone to see, and John analysed their sequences with them in front of the whole group. He would often point



things out, connections that others hadn't spotted. It was an exciting process. Marti Lintunen, who'd originally organised the workshop, was there sitting next to John and he was the one who would translate when things were unclear. But I agree with you. I literally had the luxury of deciding when I was going to film something or not. I couldn't film everything that was happening so there were times when I'd stand down the rest of the crew, we'd worked all the morning, maybe filmed a bit of one of the classroom sessions already, and for the rest of the afternoon I'd just sit in there and listen and watch. And often think to myself, if a discussion was going particularly well, 'Oh God, I wished I'd filmed this one'.

**Michael:** There's a lovely moment where one of the students says, or one of the photographers says, 'I don't know whether I'm shooting a poem or a journalism story'. This space between is quite interesting because that's where I think a lot of Berger and Mohr's books sit. Somewhere between a poem and journalism. Reportage, documentary, artwork, it's quite hard to place, isn't it?

**John:** Yes, it is difficult. In trying to translate Jean Mohr's long photo sequence 'If Each Time' from the book to the screen, about an old village woman looking back over her life, I don't know if I successfully managed it or not because the difference between a sequence in a book where you have complete control over how long you look at each picture before turning the page, going back and forth over the images too, is totally different from the forward thrust of a film, always moving forward, the length of each shot decided by the director and out of your, the viewer's, control. Yes. I was pretty nervous when the time came to show my version of 'If Each Time' to them. In the end, what happened was that the four programmes were completely finished by the time Anna and I travelled to Geneva to give John and Jean a complete showing of the series. They were edited and the BBC had signed them off. There was no going back. If they hadn't liked them then there would have been nothing I could do about it. We were at Jean Mohr's house in Geneva, and I put the tape of the first programme in the player. There was John and his wife Beverly, and Jean and his wife Simone who worked as a director in Swiss television. I was quite nervous, apprehensive really, and I let them watch that first episode on their own. When the first tape finished, I went in with the next one and put it on and they all seemed in a good mood, they'd enjoyed the first one, and I sat in there after that and watched the rest of the series with them.

**Michael:** It was interesting with that sequence that you shot of 'If Each Time'. I noticed that you put music over it. And that's the sequence that I've been exploring in a performance as well. Just watching a performer flick through the pages with a camera over the top, having it live. And then having some music playing feels like the most appropriate way to share that sequence.

**John:** I couldn't imagine it without any sound on it apart from the sound of the turning pages. We commissioned sound artist, Ron Geesin, to make an electronic variation of an old Savoyard folk tune for that particular part of the programmes. In fact, there's no music in the rest of series, (although that's not quite true as there's some electronic

sounds, again by Ron Geesin, over a short sequence of pictures 'Sea of Photographs' in the first programme). I didn't want to wallpaper the whole thing with incidental music.

**Michael:** I was thinking about what you do with the theory - you mentioned earlier that kind of theory stuff. It's a book that's quite theoretical and philosophical. It's called a possible theory of photography. Because I noticed just a few times you see Berger writing an arrow on the blackboard. And I know that you sent a screen grab of when he wrote a few words on the Blackboard. There's a sense that maybe he was also giving the students or photographers a lecture or a kind of talk.

**John:** Yes. He would often do an introduction to the afternoon's session. He didn't do it every day, but he would often do something he'd been thinking about and talk to them. And then one of the photographers would offer up a sequence and they would discuss that. What was amazing was the way John dissected the photographs, I mean, I saw them, at the same time as him. Everybody except the photographer would see them at the same time as him. We'd all, the whole room, would see these pictures projected. And, in fact, you know, what amazed me was he would often come up with things and start talking about them almost immediately after the first showing. When they'd finished, he'd say 'Can we see that again?' We'd look at it again. Then he would talk about it, 'I see what you're doing', 'I think the first thing that strikes me is' etc. and he would go off on a kind of journey interpreting this sequence. Often, I would think, 'why didn't I see that?' I did after he explained it, but I think that was one of the things about him, he often had a way of explaining things so that they seemed fairly obvious, afterwards, but you hadn't seen them yourself. He would explain them in a fairly, straight-forward, way. I didn't hear him talking in a way to try to obscure the thing he was talking about. It would appear to be plain speaking. He was thinking as he went along. The pauses in his speech are very particular to him. People generally will talk and talk and talk, they might be thinking in the background but are trying to keep up with their mouth. But he wouldn't do that. He would literally be making thinking noises. You quite often heard 'mmm, erm...' he'd be doing this, and he'd have the whole audience hanging on it, willing the thoughts to come out. It was usually worth waiting for.

**Michael:** The other thing he does in his writing and in the programme is he uses a metaphor. So, he talks about the iron filings and the magnet as a metaphor for memory and how we look at the photo and we put all these memories together. Yeah, that's another way, I guess, of communicating to a wider audience. But I don't think that's in the book. It's in the programme and it was in your transcript of the programme? But I've never seen him use that metaphor before.

**John:** I explained in those notes really, the problem of getting the BBC to make their mind up. And in the end, on that year, I phoned him up. I remember it was at the beginning of January in 1988. And he'd gone off the idea of making the film then. He'd moved on and he said, 'I think it's too old. I don't know if I want to speak about it. I'm going to go to Finland to do this workshop. Why don't we film that?' I was thinking I've gone through all this trying to get this programme about the book sorted out and now there's another thing thrown into the mix. But it gave me the opportunity of saying to

Alan Yentob, who was Head of Music and Arts at the BBC at the time, 'Look, he's not going to do it, if we don't do it soon,'. And then Yentob literally just said in quite an off-hand way after keeping us waiting for four years: 'Go and get on with it'.

**Michael:** You were writing in your notes your memories of that time, but what were the reactions when the programme came out on TV? And how would you like it to be remembered as a kind of a documentary about their work?

**John:** The series got some good reviews at the time in *The Guardian* and another paper, *The Independent*. But it was kind of buried away on Sunday night on BBC Two. Opposite variety shows and plays and what have you. So, it wasn't exactly promoted vigorously. It was shown twice after that, I think, I don't know if you saw that the one that was shown, the programme that was made just before he (Berger) died, actually before his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

**Michael:** Was it about his eyes, his cataracts?

**John:** Yes, his cataracts were part of that. There were quite a lot of clips from my programmes, John interacting with Jean Mohr, quite a lot of clips were used, probably because I covered their partnership and collaborations thoroughly. But apart from that, apart from the time in 2005 when there was the 'Here Is Where We Meet' festival in London when the series was shown twice at the NFT. The BBC made a lot of programmes over the years with John, Channel Four made quite a few too. But when that 2005 festival was being planned Mike Dibb went to see the BBC. And he said, 'Look, it's John Berger's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday coming up. Why don't you show all the films? Why don't you show all the programmes that you've got, make a season of it' and was told, 'Who's interested in John Berger?' You know, they could have shown those films for virtually nothing. They own them all. I really thought it was going to be shown again. But it wasn't. I think it's a real pity for it not to be shown again. John was on good form in those programmes, Jean Mohr too. Although I've been asked to post the programmes up on YouTube I haven't, because it's not really up to me to do that.

**Michael:** I think in a way, it comes from a time when perhaps TV was more able to be reflective and intellectually challenging.

**John:** Yes, I mean now you would have said I can make one programme about that book. Nobody is going to be interested in four programmes about it.

**Michael:** But it's wrestling with some quite complex ideas quoting Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, putting quotes on a screen a bit like a lecture. We wouldn't expect that on BBC Two now.

**John:** No, no, not at all. I mean, you'd be lucky to get it on BBC Four. BBC Four has kind of taken over from Two. Channel 4, probably not at all now, I used to work with them frequently, they broadcast some pretty off-the-wall kind of stuff for a long time.

**Michael:** Just to say, I think the book itself, *Another Way of Telling* marks the third book that they really collaborated on, and I've seen it referred to as 'the paperback trilogy', *A Fortunate Man*, *A Seventh Man* and *Another Way of Telling*. They do go on after that to do another book, *At the edge of the world* (1999), but that seems to be more like a Jean Mohr project with a kind of a Foreword by Berger, which is also used in another book. I feel like you've captured them right at the end of their collaboration in a way.

**John:** When I first approached John about making *Another Way of Telling*, he suggested Jean Mohr presenting it. John said 'I haven't got much time, I'm too busy etc.' The thing about him was that people (including me) were always asking him to be involved in projects, 'why can't we do this? can we make a book of this? etc'. And often, if he was kind of half-interested in something, he would always bat it back and say, 'Well, you get it commissioned and I'll be a consultant on it' or something like that. So yes, because it took so long, it took four years to get it actually commissioned, at one point earlier on he said, 'Why don't you get Jean to do it because he's very good on camera and I'll do what I can, but I can't be the main man in it'. Well, by the time BBC agreed four years later, he'd become the main presenter. He was also, I'll just add, he was also incredibly supportive once the project was definitely happening.

**Michael:** You collaborated with him on books as well.

**John:** That's right. Yes, definitely. I'm working on one at the moment, actually, it's the last one I've got of his so I'm rather taking my time over it. We did a trip in 2009 to Le Corbusier's Chapel at Ronchamp. We travelled with two nuns. American nuns, it was quite an outing. And I recorded all of that and then I made it into a book. It has been published in Spain, but only in Spanish. But I'm just doing the English version of it, at the moment. But I haven't got anything after that unfortunately.

**Michael:** When you took the script to show John Berger, in those images that you show in the documentary, how fully formed was the script then? Because so much of it is improvised or filming the workshop or filming the pieces to camera, which seem a bit more organic?

**John:** Yes. There wasn't a proper script as such. All I had was a list of the sections of the book that I thought John needed to cover. And also, the sections of the book I thought Jean Mohr would cover and the parts that they could talk about together. But apart from that, most of the time, there's no formal script. It was all improvised. When we were in Finland for instance, he would ask me, 'What should we do next?' I'd say, 'We'll do a section about that Kertesz photograph of the four soldiers sitting on the latrine'. He would ask, 'How long do you want it to be?'. I'd say, '2 minutes. It can be a little bit longer or a bit shorter, but 2 minutes would be fine'. And he would literally go outside the cabin, walk up and down running through the words himself. And then he would come back in and sit down. We'd all be ready to film, and he'd just do it. And often we'd record those pieces to camera only once. At the end, the first thing he would say was, 'How long was that?' And I would say, 'It was 2 minutes'. And we'd be on to the next thing. But the rest of the sections, generally, they went as long as they lasted,

on camera and then I edited them down. In general, I didn't know completely what they were going to talk about.

**Michael:** One thing I've done as well is visited the archives at the British Library and looked at some of Berger's notes and there are boxes and boxes of files. But one of the things that does come across is that the challenge of publishing some of these books and the slightly problematic relationship with publishers about how you do these complicated layouts like image and text. And they refer to that a little bit in the programme, don't they? When they're talking about *A Seventh Man*, saying they really wanted to marry image and texts and they had to work hard with the publisher. I read that there were quite a few issues with the first print run and the book had to be recalled and then reprinted again. I think they had some issues with that publisher and then moved to another publisher, but I don't know if you know much about that side of the story.

**John:** I don't know anything about that. I published *Pages of the Wound*, John's poems, photographs and drawings in 1994. That's a pretty special book. A collectors' book really. He just sent me some poems, over a period of time, and then I got on with it. I received an email from his wife when I sent the finished book to him saying, 'He's not here, at the moment. I've unwrapped it, I had to look at the book, and I've wrapped it up again, packed it all up again so that he can have the pleasure of opening it'. When we did, *I Send You This Cadmium Red* (2000), for instance, we both went to Barcelona on a couple of occasions. I spent a lot of time on my own there with the book designer. John was very supportive in the sense of letting me get on with it. With *Lapwing and Fox* (2016), he had little to do with that design-wise. He was quite happy for me to get on with it but it was always a treat to send those things to him wondering what his opinion and feedback was going to be.

**Michael:** Thanks so much. I feel like there's a lot of material there. I have probably got more questions.

**John:** Yes, definitely.

**Michael:** That's great. It was great to hear about your work with John Berger and Jean Mohr. Thank you very much for your time today.

## Conclusion

The conversation that took place above has informed the process of making *Another Way of Telling*, recently supported by Manchester School of Art and Harrogate Theatre. To mark the 40th anniversary of *Another Way of Telling* (1982) by writer, John Berger, and photographer, Jean Mohr, the piece explores the relationship between performance and photography, photographer and photographed, image and text. Taking the form of an immersive slideshow, the piece explores the book to ask how each time we perform is different to each time we take a photograph. We have adapted the photo-montage John Christie describes in *Another Way of Telling*, a sequence without words

entitled 'If Each Time'. A single performer guides the audience through the pages of the book using a live camera, a medical trolley loaded with mementos, Berger's words, and Mohr's images. She travels between fact and fiction, philosophy, and poetry, restaging verbatim interviews with Susan Sontag, and becoming the woman whose life the pictures evoke. She brings to life a fragmented book to ask how photography captures moments in time – the performance sits somewhere between an image and a story.<sup>1</sup>

*Another Way of Telling* is the final piece of *The Berger & Mohr Trilogy* following *A Fortunate Man* (2018) and *A Seventh Man* (2020). All pieces in the trilogy seek different ways of staging the dynamic dialogue between image and text in Berger & Mohr's books. In doing so, they seek to leave a space for listening for audiences to encounter the work and to create a space for the reader and/or viewer to inhabit. The piece will premiere at the Mercer Gallery in Harrogate, UK, in September 2023. If possible, excerpts of this interview with John Christie will be played during the performance to reveal the process of making a performance about a book which has also had a film made about it and to give a first-person perspective on the process of working with John Berger and Jean Mohr. I am grateful to John Christie for taking part in this conversation and sharing the process of making the film in 1988 which still resonates today.

To conclude, Mohr's photographs in the books that make up what Rick Poynor calls their 'trilogy of innovative collaborations' - *A Fortunate Man*, *A Seventh Man* and *Another Way of Telling* - bring their human subjects close to the reader, yet retain an unknowable status.<sup>2</sup> As Berger observes of Mohr's work for their collaboration: 'Every photograph presents us with two messages, a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning a shock of discontinuity'.<sup>3</sup> In this way, these source texts do not lend themselves to conventional modes of dramatic adaptation as they enact a non-linear, jolting, collage-like dialogue between ethnographic observation and photographic record, with those vocabularies individually and together illuminating, problematising and even mystifying their subject-matter. The new performance trilogy devised from this creative process self-consciously embraces the tension these textual forms produce. In each case, the performance requires implicit and tacit negotiation between different aesthetic forms, historical contexts, and experiential positions.

*The Berger & Mohr Trilogy* was undertaken as a practice-as-research enquiry that sought to explore and translate the form and content of Berger and Mohr's co-authored books. Performance as a methodology was used as a means of examining the sources' aesthetic and textual qualities, in turn stimulating development of new dramaturgies and scenographies in adaptation. Combining archive footage with contemporary reportage and verbatim text, *A Fortunate Man* (2018) and *A Seventh Man* (2020) transpose Berger's words and Mohr's images into performance, seeking 'ways of staging' these seminal works. Berger asserted that 'To understand a landscape, we have to situate ourselves in it', and in working to meet this challenge from a 21<sup>st</sup> century vantage point, the research process behind these two adaptations included interviewing medical professionals, migrant workers and academics about the influence of the books and their contemporary resonances.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, Berger and Mohr's *Another Way of Telling*, since it explores the very languages of writing and photography employed by

the authors, makes different demands for adaptation. In this project, the research and making process has resulted in a performance designed for non-theatre spaces - galleries, bookshops, libraries – which appropriately frame the book's questions. In all three cases, the 'landscapes' the books represented were understood and approached as spaces constituted on multiple levels, which included the biographical, geographical, medical, sociological, aesthetic, and historical. This conversation reflects on, and contributes to, the landscapes in which the work I am making continues to situate itself.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Video documentation of *Another Way of Telling* (2022) with an interview with director, Michael Pinchbeck, can be found online here: <https://vimeo.com/694147125>. The R&D took place at Primary in Nottingham with the support of Manchester School of Art.

<sup>2</sup> Poynor, Rick 'On My Shelf: A Classic by Berger and Mohr', 2 August 2012. [Design Observer](#).

<sup>3</sup> Berger, John & Jean Mohr. *Another Way of Telling: A Possible Theory of Photography*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016 [1982]. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin, 1972. 4.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Frances Babbage for helping to contextualise *Another Way of Telling* (2022) in these final paragraphs which come from a joint book proposal for our forthcoming publication, *Ways of Staging: The Berger & Mohr Trilogy* for Intellect's Playtext series. The book will explore the adaption of all three Berger & Mohr books, *A Fortunate Man*, *A Seventh Man* and *Another Way of Telling*.