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### Berger and Mohr: Another Way of Telling

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## Berger and Mohr: Another Way of Telling

**John Berger and Jean Mohr.** *Another Way of Telling.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1982. 300 pp., ill. \$17.50.

**Reviewed by Howard S. Becker**  
Northwestern University

John Berger, a versatile writer and critic, and Jean Mohr, an experienced photojournalist, have collaborated on three previous books. *Ways of Seeing* investigated visual habits in relation to painting and photography. *A Seventh Man* and *A Fortunate Man* experimented in combining words and photographs to convey social analysis, the most ambitious and thoughtful such experiments since Mead and Bateson's *Balinese Character*.

I have always been particularly impressed by *A Seventh Man*, which looks at the phenomenon of migrant workers in Europe in three ways: a more-or-less conventional Marxist analysis, complete with abstract theories and statistics; a story about a nameless migrant from a nameless country ("He") whose experiences embody the general theory as he moves back and forth between his home village and the country in which he is a "guest worker"; and a series of photo essays about those same experiences. The theory was incisive, the story gave it a subjective dimension, and the photographs filled in all the details the other two modes left out. *A Fortunate Man* was less successful, I thought, mostly because the theory invoked to illuminate the life of a medical practitioner was less persuasive. But that judgment is only relative to the first book's success. Both were remarkably inventive, thought-provoking and attention-compelling.

*Another Way of Telling* continues this collaborative exploration, with more explicit attention, practical and theoretical, to the problems of combining photographs and text analytically. The general theme is that photographs have some inherent ambiguity, that furnishing text cuts down that ambiguity and makes pictures more "meaningful" and by the same token more capable of misleading, that the photographer, the editor, and the viewer contribute to the photograph's eventual meaning, and that in this fundamental sense the meaning of a picture is socially constructed. But Berger also argues that photographs make use not only of a conventionalized language of visual forms but also of a "half-language" of appearances, whose coherences furnish the raw material for all these later manipulations. Although in real life appearances rarely fulfill our expectation that they will reveal further meaning, photographers quote from appearances selectively so as to produce that added

meaning. Some photographs quote from appearances so as to provide evidence for an argument about the operations of history. Most people use their own personal photographs to preserve a timeless moment of their own lives against the continual historical change of contemporary capitalist life.

As well argued as these ideas are in Berger's essay "Appearances," it is the least interesting of the book's five parts. Mohr's very personal "Beyond my Camera" gets at the same ideas more concretely, through stories of his own experiences photographing and discussing photographs with people. Like Berger, and as personally felt as his essay is, Mohr is saying something by now quite familiar.

What makes *Another Way of Telling* stand out from other such discussions by photographers and theoreticians of photography is the 150-page image essay without words, "If each time . . ." and the accompanying short essay, "Stories." This essay

attempts to follow an [old mountain] peasant woman's reflections on her life. If she were suddenly asked: What are you thinking about? she would invent a simple answer, because the question, when taken seriously, becomes unanswerable. Her reflections cannot be defined by any answer to a question beginning with *What?* And yet she was thinking, reflecting, remembering, recalling, and doing so in a consecutive manner. She was making sense of herself to herself.

They mean to give you the experience of reflecting with her, not particularly in narrative form (though the images are arranged, necessarily, sequentially in a quasi-narrative), but ultimately in a free-ranging way, in which you move among the images as the old woman might herself.

That is a tall order and I am not sure the authors have filled it. But the essay (and readers' knowledge of their previous work) makes the attempt and the discussion of it necessary reading for anyone who cares about pictures and their use for social and political analysis. In addition there are all sorts of extra treats tucked into these pages, such as Berger's wonderful readings of some early photographs by Andre Kertesz.