



HAL
open science

Fifty Years of Seeing with John Berger? Anniversaries and Un-niversaries

Sarah Gould, Diane Leblond

► **To cite this version:**

Sarah Gould, Diane Leblond. Fifty Years of Seeing with John Berger? Anniversaries and Un-niversaries. *Études britanniques contemporaines - Revue de la Société d'études anglaises contemporaines*, 2023, 65, <10.4000/ebc.13866>. <hal-05040160>

HAL Id: hal-05040160

<https://hal.science/hal-05040160v1>

Submitted on 18 Apr 2025

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 - Attribution - Non-commercial use - No Derivative Works - International License

Fifty Years of Seeing with John Berger? Anniversaries and Un-niversaries

Sarah Gould and Diane Leblond



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ebc/13866>

DOI: 10.4000/ebc.13866

ISSN: 2271-5444

Publisher

Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée

Printed version

Date of publication: December 1, 2023

ISSN: 1168-4917

Provided by Université de Lorraine



Electronic reference

Sarah Gould and Diane Leblond, "Fifty Years of Seeing with John Berger? Anniversaries and Un-niversaries", *Études britanniques contemporaines* [Online], 65 | 2023, Online since 01 October 2023, connection on 18 April 2025. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/13866> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.13866>

This text was automatically generated on December 2, 2023.



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

Fifty Years of Seeing with John Berger? Anniversaries and Un-niversaries

Sarah Gould and Diane Leblond

- 1 In October 2022 the *Société d'Études Anglaises Contemporaines* (SEAC) devoted its annual conference to the *œuvre* of 'a writer, a poet, an essayist, a painter, a drama writer, a scriptwriter' (Mohr xv), and a luminary of 20th- and 21st-century British culture: John Berger. Taking place fifty years after he was awarded the Booker Prize for *G.* and became a household name thanks to *Ways of Seeing*, the conference took that double anniversary as a somewhat paradoxical opportunity to examine Berger's complex legacy. Indeed, it proposed to pay tribute to the author's significant impact on his contemporaries, both as a writer of fiction and non-fiction and as an art historian, while also remembering his own resistance to the 'individualist illusion' that would present culture as the labour of isolated protagonists, and the history of art as 'a relay race of geniuses' (qtd. Overton 2015 xxii).
- 2 At the time of publishing a Call for Papers such endeavours to respond to Berger's work had not been very many. In 2016 Ralf Hertel and David Malcolm pointed out that no collection so far had attempted to 'bring together . . . scholars from different fields in order to come to terms with Berger's many-faceted art' (11). Beside *On John Berger: Telling Stories*, the remarkable volume they edited specifically for that purpose, and the collection of essays published the same year in celebration of the author's 90th birthday, under the title *A Jar of Wild Flowers*, there are still a couple of significant precedents to mention here. Two special issues of the *Journal of Visual Culture* (2012) and *Critical Quarterly* (2023) respectively chose as their point of focus the 40th and 50th anniversaries of *Ways of Seeing*, and equally formulated reservations as to the compatibility between the very notion of anniversary and Berger's stance and work. Raiford Guins's opening statement that the *Journal of Visual Culture* issue was inspired by a 'crime against design' (121) directly addresses a tendency to erase innovative practices of collaborative culture-making in order to promote a more traditional

understanding of authorship and handling of author names. The decision ‘to adopt *Ways of Seeing* as the title for its themed issue in order to neither credit the labor to a single author, nor the project/performance to a single medium’ (123) was meant as a response to the 2008 Penguin edition, in which the page bearing the names of Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, and Richard Hollis alongside John Berger’s was pushed to the very back of the volume. The special issue of *Critical Quarterly*, which was in preparation when the conference took place, opens with an admission that an apparent opportunity proved rather a challenge: as Leo Robson puts it, ‘[this] was originally intended to mark a pair of anniversaries—fifty years of *G.* and *Ways of Seeing*—but John Berger insisted on spoiling the plan’ (3).

- 3 The difficulty outlined in this last instance, however, lies in the multitudinous nature of Berger’s *œuvre* itself: ‘[h]is achievement led in too many directions’ (Robson 3). The ambition and range of his work is awe-inspiring to say the least, and does seem to pre-empt any attempt at proposing one retrospective angle of interpretation. Yet the multiplicity of genres and media he explored, which ‘mark him as a true polymath, an *uomo universale* in the Renaissance spirit’ (Hertel and Malcolm 19), also make him an excellent subject of study for a scholarly association working on 20th and 21st century British literature and culture. Described by Amarjit Chandan as ‘the writer of our time’ (xix), Berger casts a long shadow over contemporary writing and culture in the anglophone world. Beyond that, the very eclecticism of his work makes him a reference point for a number of recent or still emerging fields of study in contemporary academia. Martin Jay writes that ‘[f]uture historians will . . . likely date the launch of visual culture studies as a serious scholarly field of study to the publication of *Ways of Seeing*’ (135). Berger’s abiding interest in ways of being with and for others, within or across species boundaries, also makes him a landmark for scholars working in animal studies, ecocriticism, and critical posthumanism—which a significant number of French academics have adopted as attractive avenues of research in recent years.
- 4 As we embarked on the project, Hertel and Malcolm’s remark on the dearth of interdisciplinary critical analysis on Berger still seemed to hold, especially here in his adopted country. One of the directions listed for future commentary in the introduction to *Telling Stories* was ‘[a] full examination of Berger’s reception, particularly in France’ (27). Yet in this country selected by the writer as his place of residence, where his writing had been staged, translated, and published, it seemed not to have received the academic attention it deserved. Riccardo Venturi notes, for instance, ‘the lack of interest that [Berger]’s output has stirred among French art historians, a situation that his passing has not altered.’ Commentators in the anglophone world have challenged ‘the degree to which Berger is, indeed . . . an eccentric figure within British fiction of the last fifty years’ (Hertel and Malcolm 17). Yet on this side of the border it almost looked as if the way he ‘utterly refused institutionalization’ allowed him to remain as Dyer describes: ‘in the original sense of the word, eccentric’ (150). In such a context, the conference undertook to commemorate Berger’s work while fully engaging with the challenges his thinking and practice pose to any form of authoritarian imposition and to disciplining processes.¹ It meant to reconsider the notion of legacy and its monographic perspective, to promote a critical understanding of ‘influence’ as ‘more associated with . . . a capitalist logic of debt and restitution that Berger rejects’ (Overton 2018 xiii), and to shed light on the collective, collaborative practices of writing he engaged in instead. In doing so it would find room for critical appraisals of Berger’s contribution to our visual perception and

imagination, leaving behind what Hertel and Malcolm described as ‘the usual *topoi* of Berger vilification or hagiography’ (18). Finally, the conference sought to find ground beyond the confines of Paris and away from capitals of the anglophone world, thereby inscribing its discussions in a decentralised geography, one that would remain attentive to the accidents and coincidences that take place on a local scale.²

- 5 As proposals for contributions found their way into our inbox, the first element of response we consigned in preparation for the present publication was that such a comprehensive examination of Berger’s writing must have seemed more of a challenge to our colleagues than we thought. This meant that although many expressed genuine interest in the project, few of these messages materialised into formal proposals towards the event, and a large majority of our participants on the day came from various parts of the English-speaking academic world. This, of course, was not an issue *per se*, but it did point to a certain reluctance in scholars who would not typically have been exposed to Berger’s work outside of or before entering into academia. Making sense of the presence and impact of Berger in France would therefore imply, in part, for us to interpret a silence. One possible hypothesis that presented itself in that context lay with the way Berger’s voice resonates in his adopted country. In their introduction to *Telling Stories* Hertel and Malcolm mentioned the productive tensions at the heart of that voice—between the temptation to exert authority and the need to leave space for the reader, between the urge to make political statements and the refusal to foreclose meaning, between eliciting intimacy and inspiring the sort of reverence elicited by the canon. It might be that the ambivalence produced by those tensions does not present itself in quite the same way for a non-British, non-native English-speaking readership and viewership. In an anglophone academic context, Berger seemed to embody both authority and intimacy—a scholarly yet relatable voice, the complexity of which called for analysis. Conversely perhaps, to French scholars Berger’s contributions seemed to appear as references rather than subjects of in-depth study in their own regard.
- 6 The challenge to find a logic that no longer opposes, but rather holds contradictory qualities together recalls Berger’s own assessment of our struggle to understand when statements ‘are connected by an *and* and not by a *but*’ (1991 7). This might be most immediately relevant for readers who happened upon Berger outside of any academic context, and whose visual worlds were turned inside out overnight as if from a picture to its negative, the way Ali Smith describes:
- So. A ten-year-old girl in the Scottish Highlands, way back in history, in 1972, is walking to school. It’s an ordinary day, and everything has changed, everything is new, and this has happened simply from a single phrase, a simple verbal act, having entered her consciousness . . . [So], she thinks as she walks through the school gates, stands in line with all the other kids, sits down in the given place in the church and looks at the Stations of the Cross on the walls, how they stick out dimensionally, are three-dimensional pictures, and the blue-painted statue of the Madonna up at the front, so there is more than just seeing, there are WAYS of seeing. (334–335)
- 7 In considering the inherent complexity of Berger’s voice as an integral part of its appeal, two main points of tension emerge that seem to characterise it in the minds of his audience. One concerns the modalities of perception, for Berger’s work across media means that his voice is, for many readers, as much spoken and heard as it is perceived as text. In “‘Then Turn the Page’: Berger by the Book’ Ben Highmore tells us ‘I can’t remember if I read Berger first before I heard him speak or if it was the other

way round. What I do know is that I can't read him now without hearing the voice, and I think it has always been that way' (124). And a similar sentiment is repeatedly expressed by commentators, whether to marvel at 'its unique, hybrid accent, its . . . familiar hesitations and qualifications that are the aperture to insight' (McWatt 93), or to analyse how contemporary audiences on YouTube rail at what they perceive as 'Oxbridge' diction (Clark 176). This specific attention to the sound of Berger's words serves as a reminder that sensations constantly overlap in his writing, as confirmed by Chandan's cross-modal comparison: 'There is something about Berger's voice too—it sounds so compelling, so intimate; like the touch' (xix). Beyond its function as a vehicle, formulating theories of how the visual and verbal come to be interlaced, Berger's voice as an art historian, presentator, activist and narrator³ therefore also features as a metadiscursive object of study, an example of the inevitable conversation it describes, between word and image, sight and hearing, the distance or *différance* of text and the presence of voice.

- 8 This necessary yet impossible articulation of free-floating text and embodied speech arguably positions Berger as a bit of an anachronist in the era of the Death of the Author. It also points to another aspect of the complexity inherent in his voice—what Hertel and Malcolm designate as the 'conflict between a political attitude, a struggle for truths and exact answers on the one hand and a love for storytelling that questions all truths on the other' (23). This in turn points to the ambivalence of his posture as a marginal figure *and* household name, and accounts for a stylistic feature commentators have had to grapple with, namely an assertiveness in tone and recourse to aphoristic phrasing that seem hardly compatible with appeals to the reader of *Ways of Seeing* to 'continue' what he has been discussing (Berger 2008 150). The contradiction has been productively delineated, for instance by Jill Casid in her analysis of the aphoristic juxtapositions that lend the text 'its muscle and its charm' (141). Quoting Sontag's assessment of aphoristic thinking as 'always in a state of concluding; a bid to have the final word' (qtd 141), Casid takes the time to question Berger's 'aesthetic of aphoristic apposition as political opposition' (142) for 'the divisive binaries it marshals,' asking whether those may not be 'profoundly inadequate to the necessary task of transforming and materializing imagination' (142). Similar reservations are formulated by Jonathan Conlin when he argues that in *Ways of Seeing*

[w]e are shown all the 'tricks of the trade', but those tricks are themselves deployed so effectively in support of the presenter's argument that an equally unintentional effect results. Comments thrown out to be provocative are elevated into aphorisms, into a credo we are impelled to subscribe to, when Berger wants us to react. Despite his efforts on screen and in the book to insist that his questioning was 'to be continued by the reader,' the visual and spoken rhetoric is just too strong. (289)

- 9 It seems however that such a fruitful paradox may simply not function in the same way in a context of reception that tends to keep much more of a separation between Berger as an academic figure and the author of landmark texts, and the writer looking to form an intimate and democratic bond with his readers. It might be that for scholars who were first introduced to him as a major thinker of contemporary culture, Berger rather unproblematically holds a position in which his epigrammatic style serves to buttress an argument or open up avenues of discussion, rather than elicit commentary. In that sense, the 'declarative voice, assured, unapologetic, and bold,' and the 'highly quotable phrases' (Sturken 152) that often characterize his style may be of use to French academic writers and remain somewhat unchallenged. Elsewhere, meanwhile, an

experience of intimacy might shape Berger's encounter with 'common readers' in French, far enough removed from academic circles that those different 'figures of "John Berger"' (Hertel and Malcolm 13) do not really overlap.

- 10 A preliminary conclusion we had to consider, then, was that those internal contradictions between vulnerable openness and authority, between the urgency of truth-telling and a constant practice of indirection do not (yet) seem as relevant in a place where John Berger is not as much of a household name. There were other ways, however, in which we did happen upon those intriguing, maddening tensions at work in his voice. As strategies go, these could almost be considered as negatives—they took shape at times when the order and method of research gave way to serendipity and accident. What they implied, in part, was to try and find where and how Berger's voice might actually resonate here, in a small provincial town of his adopted country: not (only) in the relatively abstracted space of academia, but in the ears of actual readers, and in places or 'pockets' shared around and shaped by his words. The two notions that this search brought to us, two practices or uses of language that ran through our understanding of Berger there and then, were translation and correspondence.

Berger in Translation

- 11 In looking for the intricacies of Berger's 'confabulations' locally in Metz, we were appropriately taking our cue from his own reminder in 'Between Two Colmars'—that the critic cannot content himself with situating the piece he studies, but must also reflexively 'place [himself] historically' (140). Geographically speaking, this heightened awareness of where we were became more palpable when circumstances and an automated response set up for maternity leave brought the conference in preparation to the attention of small bookshop owner Anne-Marie Carlier. Some of her patrons, she knew, were avid readers of John Berger, an author for whom she herself felt a particular fondness. So we took the opportunity to organise a reading at *Autour du monde*, an establishment the size and name of which combined aptly evoked Berger's own concern, as much for the minutiae of the here and now as for the affairs of the world at large. The event allowed us to let Berger's own voice serve as a prelude to the conference, and bring us together with non-academic readers. It also opened up a space in which Berger's originals conversed with their French translations, as published by *l'Olivier*, *l'Écarquillé* and *Héros-Limite*. Beginning with his own 'auto-portrait' in *Palabres*, it made perfect sense to hear that not only language, but translation as a form of dealing with 'the inarticulate as well as the articulate' in language, featured prominently in Berger's description of himself and of his practice as a writer. The notion that '[a] spoken language is a body, a living creature' (Berger 2016 5) captures the visceral quality of our relation with words that we received 'from the mouths of our mothers . . . a phonetic uterus' (5). Read by Diane Leblond across the distance of translation, but in her own native French, the words resonated with a different sort of power as they lulled to sleep the three-month-old strapped to her chest.
- 12 By immediately considering the plurality of languages, Berger reminds us of the distance that informs even this most intimate experience of being enfolded in our Mother Tongue. Language is a place we inhabit, but also a forum, a space dedicated to the discussion and contestation of any author(itative) decision:

After I've written a few lines I let the words slip back into the creature of their language. And there, they are instantly recognized and greeted by a host of other words, with whom they have an affinity of meaning, or of opposition, or of metaphor or alliteration or rhythm. I listen to their confabulation. Together they are contesting the use to which I put the words I chose. They are questioning the roles I allotted them. So I modify the lines, change a word or two, and submit them again. Another confabulation begins. (7)

- 13 This depiction of the writer as he listens to the rustle of words echoes another scene, and another moment in the translation of a text into another: 'When I'm drawing' Berger tells us, 'I try to unravel and transcribe a *text* of appearances, which already has, I know, its indescribable but assured place in my Mother Tongue' (6). As the drawing of an olive tree interjects here, with the caption 'Texte Olivier,' we find that 'another confabulation begins' in which the branches of the Mother Tongue twist towards another idiom, to form a visual pun, a play on translation—'Olivier' is the tree, but also a dear friend of Berger's, and the eponymous head of a company that has published him in French for decades.

Figure 1—John Berger. *Confabulations* 2016, 6.



- 14 It was a coincidence, but no real surprise, to find that Olivier Cohen himself chose that same self-portrait to compose his essay in appreciation of Berger. This meditation on words and the commerce of languages, with its constant reminder of the organic proximity and distance between languages and between media, from image to word to music, became a point of reference throughout the conference, as is clear from Flora Hibberd's own reading. Its playfulness resonates in Riccardo Venturi's amusement at the French pronunciation of Berger's name, which brings out the shepherd hidden behind the writer. It also surfaced in conversations with those 'common readers' whose bodily experience echoed that which Berger's words described, an intimate connection transformed, carried over by words in English then French, and yet not more distant

from its embodied frame. Such was the experience, in Jean Valès's words, of riding a motorcycle: 'La matière file, souple, fluide dans le souffle bruyant, au-dessus de la matière, étrangères l'une à l'autre le plus longtemps possible, à rejeter le rendez-vous de l'une avec l'autre au point d'attraction, au point d'arrivée.' The symbiotic movement of the human body and machine will recall Jean's crossing of the European landscape in *To The Wedding*, but also essays and testimonies by friends of Berger's, in *A Jar of Wild Flowers* ('Oil,' 'Afterword'), in the last sequence of *The Seasons in Quincy*, and in Anne-Marie Carlier's own impression of him.

- 15 As it reminded us of the necessity of translation, the reading at *Autour du Monde* also served to highlight the degree to which Berger himself looked for the paradoxical, in-between space of translation, writing as he did from without the geographic and linguistic borders of his native England. The possible translations of 'confabulations,' from 'palabres' to 'conciliabules,' describe exactly the sort of gathering and indistinct chatter he evokes as a continuous, contrapuntal background to writing. In Berger's insistence that the author remain attentive to that discussion, contestation and revision of the words he proposes, we may find another expression of his reliance on readers' ever-critical minds and eyes. Where he once entreated us to 'consider what [he] arrange[s], but be sceptical of it' (qtd Gunaratnam 5), Berger now wrote of the collective murmur without which no voice could be raised. His consideration of language as a common good which materially shapes world historical processes plays a crucial part in the dialectic tension that inhabits his writing, between the formulation of a clear political message and the opening up of a space from which readers or viewers might contribute to the emergence of meaning. Among commentaries on Berger, one practice of writing stands out which seems to encapsulate both the urgency of commitment to a cause and a deference to the reader's part in making sense of things—correspondence.

Berger in Correspondence

- 16 Letters are both a constant feature of Berger's long and prolific career as a writer and a shape-shifting, modular format that is found across his *œuvre*. If his words constantly cross the borders between genres and media and the demarcation line that separates fact from fiction, they particularly do so as missives. Describing Berger as 'one of the world's most vital correspondents' (Smith 329), Ali Smith begins her essay in appreciation of his voice by evoking exactly such a multi-faceted play on correspondence: '[in] a letter he writes, to Rosa Luxemburg, the long-dead (murdered in 1919) revolutionary socialist writer, Marxist activist and philosopher . . . he doesn't just talk to her, he talks with her, via some of the writing from letters she wrote herself, often when she was in prison' (329). In Smith's analysis, the moment of putting pen to paper inextricably connects with the act of reading and responding to a letter, as an indirect yet very politically and materially committed addressee. Berger's insistence 'that the aesthetic act, that art itself, is always collaborative, always in dialogue, or multilogue, a communal act, and one that involves questioning of form and of the given shape of things and form' (330), therefore finds its purest expression in the way that he, 'who can do anything with a text . . . most of all will make it about the gift of engagement, correspondence' (330). Berger's way of appealing to readers finds a particularly apt form in the discursive structure that links actual writer and addressee

across time and space, and as such points to the constant possibility of interception and interpretation, whether friendly or hostile. The interpersonal bond that calls the letter into existence accounts for its combination of explicit communication and implicit details that remain between the lines.

- 17 Bringing into focus the never-quite-certain, often unexpected trajectories of the written word, correspondence insists on the material presence of a channel of communication and challenges it at the same time—as is the case when the author of the letter is incarcerated. In that respect, the historical figure of Rosa Luxembourg finds a fictional counterpart in Berger’s Xavier, the political prisoner whose initial provides one of the titular letters in *From A to X* (2008). The novel’s take on the epistolary genre forms the basis for Rachel Bower’s thesis that Berger’s ‘serious commitment to letters’ ‘speaks to a wider preoccupation . . . of launching an “appeal” to the reader’ (163). The critic’s in-depth reading of Berger’s ‘real and literary letters’ (163) delineates the complex collaboration of communication and encryption, and echoes Smith’s own understanding of ‘engagement’ as or with ‘correspondence.’ Considering as it does the probability that letters never reach their destination, the quasi necessity that they find readers and interpreters outside of the epistolary dyad,⁴ Berger’s practice of correspondence captures the ambivalent push and pull of authority and reciprocity within one voice.
- 18 As chance would have it, the evocation of Berger’s letters serendipitously brought us back, across time, to local manifestations of his presence in Metz. In the opening of his keynote intervention, Tom Overton suggested that beside the 50th anniversary referenced in its title, the conference actually came twenty years after Berger’s own visit to Metz in 2002. In its anecdotal detail, the evocation of Berger’s ghostly presence in the city turned the twenty-year mark into something of a paradoxical anniversary: an un-niversary of sorts, insignificant beyond what it meant for our gathering there and then, but in some respects perhaps more material in situating our own endeavour. It made much sense that as we followed the trail of Berger’s trip to Metz we found that it led to a letter he sent to his friend and collaborator, film-maker Timothy Neat. In the message which the latter most kindly agreed for us to read and include in the present publication, we witness the back and forth movement, between correspondents, of words and images, of concepts and impressions, of feelings and creative ideas. As we read, from our own position without the dual conversation of first and second persons, we are pulled in and pushed aside all at once: what we see ‘demands of [us] that [we] engage, passes out of itself and takes up residence in the self, in correspondence with it’ (Smith 330).

Contents

- 19 In this special issue of *Études britanniques contemporaines*, contributions are categorized into distinct sections. In the first, entitled ‘John Berger in Metz: Three Letters,’ original and previously unpublished texts prompt a reflection on the resonance of Berger’s voice in the northeast of France. The initial letter, written by John Berger to his friend, the writer, director and photographer Timothy Neat, bears witness to his wanderings through Metz and holds some of the visual detail he gathered during his visit of the Saint Étienne cathedral. The following piece is a testimonial by Olivier Cohen delving into Berger’s unique relationship with writing. Cohen here explores Berger’s poetic yet

precise musings on language in *Confabulations*, which he translated into and published in French. His testimony discusses Berger's definition of the 'mother tongue,' encompassing verbal and non-verbal languages, and highlights translation as a return to the preverbal. Drawing parallels with Berger's life and that of Charlie Chaplin, another orphan turned insolent, the text emphasizes Berger's resistance to authority. Lastly, Anne-Marie Carlier, the founder and owner of *Autour du monde*, shares her own encounter with Berger, through his words and later in person. After dedicating twenty years of her life to other bookstores, Anne-Marie established *Autour du Monde* with the vision of creating not just a personal library but an inclusive community space for readers of all kinds.

- 20 In the second section, academics delve into Berger's *œuvre* from various angles and disciplinary perspectives. Maura Coughlin establishes meaningful connections between Berger's texts and the French artists Jean-François Millet, Gustave Courbet, and Ferdinand Cheval. Through this exploration, she not only places Berger within a French artistic tradition but also grounds him geographically in French landscapes and soils. By spotlighting Berger's keen interest in rural scenery and the experiences of peasants, she moreover effectively illustrates how his approach resonates with contemporary environmental thinkers such as Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, and Timothy Morton. Berger's emphasis on the inseparability of humanity from the natural world and his investigations into the intricate relationships between humans, animals, and the environment become apparent in his writings on these three artists, whose works convey close bonds between peasants and animals.
- 21 The profound relationship that humans share with the animal kingdom also guides Jean-Michel Ganteau's analysis. In his article he interprets *King*—a novel told from the point of view of a homeless couple's dog—as a text in which the non-human narrator's unique perspective unveils concealed entities and stories, accentuating marginalized elements omitted from official narratives. With particular reference to Leblanc's landmark essay on social invisibility, Ganteau demonstrates that by exploring themes of exclusion and solidarity *King* prompts readers to contemplate the act of paying attention, shedding light on those who are often overlooked. Such a singular narrative approach, he argues, illuminates the ordinary and encourages readers to acknowledge perception as both an ethical and political faculty.
- 22 Moving from the four-legged grounded perspective down to the subterranean world, Riccardo Venturi delves into two of Berger's notable encounters with the depths of the earth, two descents between London and Pont d'Arc. The first of these, known as 'The Vertical Line' (1999), is a unique fusion of theatre and archaeological exploration, taking place at the Strand subway station in London. The second journey is Berger's venture into the Chauvet Cave, an experience that led to a documentary by Pierre-Oscar Lévy and the creation of three texts by Berger himself. Here Venturi closely examines the nuances of Berger's voice, which serves as a conduit for traversing a 30,000-year span of history. Venturi's analysis includes a paradigmatic scene where, emerging from the cave, Berger retrieves his dictaphone and listens to his own recorded voice.
- 23 Liliane Louvel turns to that very voice and its reverberations in the work of another author and reader of Berger's. Within her text she analyses the extent to which Smith's novel *How to Be Both* (2014) confirms her assessment: 'everything I've ever written or aspired to write has been in one way or another an appreciation of the work of John

- Berger' (330). The book's narrative unfolds through the viewpoints of two characters: George, a 16-year-old girl residing in present-day Cambridge, and Francesco del Cossa, an Italian Renaissance artist renowned for creating a set of frescoes in the 'Hall of the Months' at the *Palazzo Schifanoia* in Ferrara. Louvel shows how the novel aligns with Berger's ideas on art, history, and perception, and how its structure and content reflect his belief in the interplay between images, context, and personal experience. One of the feats of the article is that it explores how the text's intricate narrative allows for various forms, or 'orders,' of ekphrasis, benefiting both the characters and the readers.
- 24 Finally, Diane Leblond's article also explores intermedial dialogue in Berger's fiction, and reconnects it with the notion of correspondence. In her analysis of *From A to X* (2008), a novel that revisits the epistolary genre and in which words and images converge, she explores the ways in which Berger's study of voice refuses to separate time from space, the visual from the verbal. In the unbridgeable distance that separates two recipients, she notes that Berger looks for ways in which his protagonists might build new paths to political resistance.
- 25 The third section of this issue follows the same logic that led Berger to choose inexpensive black-and-white illustrations over the glossy ones often found in exhibition catalogues and academic books. As the conference looked for the marks Berger left in our ways of seeing, especially where these imply unexpected yet welcome encounters unchecked by academic boundaries, this section aligns with Berger's aim to engage with a broad audience. Here it is not so much the authors' status that makes for the non-canonical or more practice-based character of the contributions, but rather the departure from the traditional format and formatting of academic articles. Here two distinct voices echo the diverse trajectories of Berger's work: the dramaturg's and the singer-songwriter's perspectives.
- 26 In an interview with John Christie, the film-maker and director of the TV documentary *Another Way of Telling*, which aired on the BBC in 1988, Michael Pinchbeck enquires about the origins of the project and the collaborative process with John Berger and Jean Mohr. This interview, characterised more as a dialogue than a one-sided perspective, dwells on Pinchbeck's own fascination with this subject, ignited by his personal involvement in adapting Berger and Mohr's book for the stage. The interview takes us behind the scenes, where Berger's voice resurfaces poignant statements ('every suicide is an accusation'), offering a perspective that enables us to see the documentary without actually watching it.
- 27 Flora Hibberd's experience circles back to the notion of an intimate relationship between Berger and his native anglophone readers, as her reflection discusses her deep engagement with Berger's concepts, from receiving *Ways of Seeing* as a gift when she was a teenager to highlighting his thoughts on language's limitations and the optimism surrounding storytelling's influence on her song-writing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BERGER, John, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972, London: Penguin Books, 2008.
- BERGER, John, 'Why Look at Animals,' *About Looking*, 1980, New York: Vintage, 1991, 3–28.
- BERGER, John, 'Between Two Colmars,' *About Looking*, 1980, New York: Vintage, 1991, 134–140.
- BERGER, John, *From A to X – A Story in Letters*, London: Verso, 2008.
- BERGER, John, 'Self-Portrait,' *Confabulations*, London: Penguin, 2016, 1–8.
- BERGER, John, *Palabres*, 2016, trad. Clément RIBES and Olivier COHEN, Paris: l'Olivier, 2018.
- BOWER, Rachel, 'John Berger: Epistolarity and a Life in Letters,' *On John Berger: Telling Stories*, eds. Ralf HERTEL & David MALCOM, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2016, 163–185. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004308114_011.
- CASID, Jill, 'Cis,' *Ways of Seeing 40th Anniversary Issue*, eds. Raiford GUINS, Juliette KRISTENSEN, and Susan PUI SAN LOK, *Journal of Visual Culture Special Issue 11.2* (2012): 140–144. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412912444187f>.
- CLARK, Laurie Beth, 'This comment has been flagged as spam,' *Ways of Seeing 40th Anniversary Issue*, eds. Raiford GUINS, Juliette KRISTENSEN, and Susan PUI SAN LOK, *Journal of Visual Culture Special Issue 11.2* (2012): 175–178. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412912444187p>.
- CONLIN, Jonathan, "'An irresponsible flow of images": Berger, Clark, and the Art of Television, 1958–1988,' *On John Berger: Telling Stories*, eds. Ralf HERTEL & David MALCOM, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2016, 273–291. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004308114_016.
- DYER, Geoff, *Ways of Telling: The Work of John Berger*, London: Pluto, 1986.
- GUINS, Raiford, Juliette KRISTENSEN, and Susan PUI SAN LOK, eds. *Ways of Seeing 40th Anniversary Issue*, *Journal of Visual Culture Special Issue 11.2* (2012): 121–180. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412912444187>.
- GUNARATNAM, Yasmin, and Amarjit CHANDAN, eds. *A Jar of Wild Flowers: Essays in Celebration of John Berger*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.
- HERTEL, Ralf, & David MALCOM, eds. *On John Berger: Telling Stories*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2016.
- HIGHMORE, Ben, "'Then Turn the Page": Berger by the Book,' *Ways of Seeing 40th Anniversary Issue*, eds. Raiford GUINS, Juliette KRISTENSEN, and Susan PUI SAN LOK, *Journal of Visual Culture Special Issue 11.2* (2012): 124–126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412912444187a>.
- JAY, Martin, 'Ways of Seeing at Forty,' *Ways of Seeing 40th Anniversary Issue*, eds. Raiford GUINS, Juliette KRISTENSEN, and Susan PUI SAN LOK, *Journal of Visual Culture Special Issue 11.2* (2012): 135–137. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412912444187d>.
- MCWATT, Tessa, 'Oil: On a Motorbike To,' *A Jar of Wild Flowers: Essays in Celebration of John Berger*, eds. Yasmin GUNARATNAM and Amarjit CHANDAN, London: Zed Books, 2016, 90–102.
- MOHR, Jean, 'Foreword,' *A Jar of Wild Flowers: Essays in Celebration of John Berger*, eds. Yasmin GUNARATNAM and Amarjit CHANDAN, London: Zed Books, 2016, xv–xvii.

- VERTON, Tom, ed. *Portraits: John Berger on Artists*. London: Verso Books, 2015.
- VERTON, Tom, ed. *Landscapes: John Berger on Art*. London: Verso Books, 2018.
- ROBSON, Leo, ed. John Berger: Stop-Gap Man, *Critical Quarterly Special Issue*, 65.1 (2023): 1–139. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/criq.12668>.
- SMITH, Ali, 'Verbs: A Gift for John Berger,' *A Jar of Wild Flowers: Essays in Celebration of John Berger*, eds. Yasmin GUNARATNAM and Amarjit CHANDAN, London: Zed Books, 2016, 329–337.
- STURKEN, Marita, 'Ways of Seeing, Practices of Looking,' *Ways of Seeing 40th Anniversary Issue*, eds. Raiford GUINS, Juliette KRISTENSEN, And Susan PUI SAN LOK, *Journal of Visual Culture Special Issue 11.2* (2012): 151–154. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412912444187i>.
- SWINTON, Tilda, Colin MCCABE, and Christopher ROTH, *The Seasons in Quincy: Four Portraits of John Berger*, The Derek Jarman Lab, 2016.

NOTES

1. On this point see HERTEL and MALCOLM: 'Berger's work is frequently seen as an œuvre that transcends and transgresses disciplinary and genre demarcations. For example, Stefan Welz insists that John Berger's heterogeneous œuvre, which can only be grasped from an interdisciplinary position, resists the traditional classification and disclosure of literary scholarship . . . His work is clearly and deliberately varied and eclectic in terms of genre and kind: novels, short fiction, poetry, essays, art criticism, impressions (see *Railtracks* written with Anne Michaels in 2011, for example), and film. His writing often includes drawings by the author or by others, and rather grainy black-and-white reproductions of photographs and paintings are one of the familiar signs of a John Berger book.' (14)
2. Such a consideration of geographic positioning was already one of the overarching aims of 'From B to X: Reinventing Art since John Berger,' a symposium held in Geneva, a scant hour's distance from Quincy. One of the accomplishments of the event was to reframe the landscape of art history and curating in the 21st century, probing methodological contours, contemporary challenges, and the roles of present-day actors through the lens of Berger's corpus.
3. On that point see HERTEL and MALCOLM: 'rather than the life of Berger, it may be more appropriate to discuss Berger-the-author-and-public-figure that his texts (via the implied author) and acts create, and the version of that author figure reproduced in commentary' (12). See also Richard Turney's essay in the same volume, "'Naturally, I have changed most of the names": The Johns of *A Painter of Our Time*' (31–48).
4. On that matter see Bower's analysis of *From A to X*: 'The novel, therefore, forces the reader to continually re-read these letters in order to make sense of the narrative, but at the same time makes us aware that we are complicit with the Herders in scrutinising the letters to make them yield their "true" meaning' (171).

AUTHORS

SARAH GOULD

University Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne

DIANE LEBLOND

University of Lorraine (Metz), UR 2338 IDEA