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A conspiracy of orphans: John Berger and the art of creative attention.

The philosopher, mystic and political activist, Simone Weill said: 'Love for our neighbour, being made of creative attention, is analogous to genius.'

When we began planning this symposium last November, on the basis of a rather reckless hunch I offered a contribution on how JB's life and work represented 'care-full practice'. At that moment it was a strong but totally un-researched and intuitive gesture. Two months later, on 7th January Berger was dead at the age of 90. So many of the tributes, reflections and memories at that time, if they did not actually use the word 'care', spoke of a similar quality of attention in Berger's life - words like *hospitality, shelter, kindness, generosity, compassion* and *listening* pepper these writings. They also implicitly posed a question to me and that was how does a Marxist practice and perform care-fullness. For, as one of these not quite extinct beasts, I am interested not just in articulating and fighting for a vision of a 'care-full' society, but in how we – any of us - might practice and conduct care-fullness in our daily lives. I am convinced that Berger performed care-fullness in that way. But his care-fullness was not a kind of fluffy, touchy-feely care-fullness (although, by all accounts, he was a very tactile person), but one that was rooted in his political convictions as a Marxist. Berger's utterances were always passionate as well as compassionate. How do we perform care?

But how to avoid eulogy or elegy?

Many of you will perhaps know of Berger's work through his iconic television series *Ways of Seeing* which was first broadcast on TV in 1972 and then published a year later. This was a ground-breaking and revolutionary project and I'll return to it shortly. Although I neither met nor spoke to the man I feel as if I have been in conversation with JB for over 40 years now. His writing always had a conversational register with his reader –but a particular reader. You. Me. A sense that he was writing for me, with me and never at me. When he was making TV programmes or films there was a compelling sense of dialogue, he was listening to us and watching us as he thought and composed his next sentence. As Richard Turney writes 'Like a letter perhaps, Berger's work invites a reply, or better, has always made room for it.'

He was an absorbed listener, often taking 2-3 minutes before replying to a point. Ben Lerner put it like this:

In the course of our time together, he said many remarkable things, but more memorable than his eloquence was the kind of space his listening made for us, his visitors. A radical hospitality. His attention rinsed the language a little, helped us to mean.

I was sent an article the other day by a friend which is utterly germane to our preoccupations here. It's called 'Care: Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities' by Thom Van Doren. This short essay – without ever mentioning his name – seemed to offer a very useful framework or scaffolding to encapsulate how John Berger's life and work can be understood as a care-full practice. Considering the writing of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Van Dooren says 'care emerges as a particularly profound engagement with the world, simultaneously (quoting Puig) "a vital affective state, an ethical engagement with the world and a practical labour."

Affective, ethical and practical: I read this to mean that caring is an embodied practice, and this is a productive framework in which to place Berger's work and his conduct as a human being, how he performed his life

In the time I have left I want ever so briefly to reflect on ***Ways of Seeing*** and two other books he wrote a long time ago: *A Fortunate Man* (1967) and *A Seventh Man* (1975). *Ways of Seeing* consisted of 4 programmes which arguably changed the trajectory of art history in the 2nd half of the C20th and which awoke us to how we see, challenged our habitual patterns of seeing and how these patterns are ideologically, socially, contextually and culturally constructed. And very particularly, the programmes showed and explained to us how women are routinely depicted and looked at in paintings. Although I don't think he uses this actual phrase, Berger alerted us to the painterly ***male gaze*** at about the same time as feminist film critic, Laura Mulvey conceptualised this in her 1975 essay entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". He started to denaturalise how we look at pictures. He is saying to us, come on, how we understand a picture is part of a huge and complex negotiation between who we are, what we believe, how we see the world, where we are in that world ***and*** the image itself. We must exercise 'care' in how we look at images.

A Fortunate Man has been a hugely influential book for me both as a mode of writing and for personal reasons. It's a profile of a country doctor – Sassall - in a poor and quite isolated part of Gloucestershire. My dad was a rural GP and I read some extracts from AFM at his humanist funeral in 1987. The book marks Berger's first collaboration with the extraordinary photographer, Jean Mohr, many of whose images you are seeing projected here. It's an account of how a doctor practices and performs care with his patients. Sassall is a complex, driven, difficult and, at times, tortured figure – prone to bouts of depression – who has a compassionate, though sometimes edgy and forthright relationship with his patients. Berger is fascinated by Sassall with whom he seems to share certain qualities. Sassall's life is devoted to care – a care that is at once very simple and highly complex - and the way Berger writes about him underlies everything I'm saying today, namely that serious and thoughtful care-fullness requires an intricate blend of the affective, the reflective, the conceptual, the material and the practical. An 'Afterword' written by Berger for the latest edition of AFM tells us that following the early death of his wife, Sassall became a 'barefoot doctor' in China and in the early 1980's took his own life. A cost of care.

A Seventh Man (1975) graphically and poignantly articulates one of Berger's tropes of writing – it's a close up account of the material reality of the lives of migrant workers from southern Europe and Turkey moving northwards to seek employment, mainly in German cities. ASM is a hugely prescient piece of writing, published – we need to remind ourselves - over 40 years ago. ASM engages with the lives of millions of largely peasant migrant workers moving to large industrial conurbations. In the period he describes, these migrations are most likely to be of single young to middle-aged men leaving their families in order to send money home for their support. Through the photographic images of Jean Mohr, through carefully constructed poetic metaphor, through vividly detailed material description, and cogent political analysis B tells the painful stories of these lives. What makes B's writing so unusual is that it combines the immediacy of the oral history tradition, - think Studs Terkel, Caitlin Moran or Ken Worpole - the sharp visual acuity of the artist, and the fierce anger of the Marxist confronting the cruel and dehumanising consequences of capitalist development. What you might call Berger's theoretical perspective he summarises thus:

To try to understand the experience of another it is necessary to dismantle the world as seen from one's own place within it and to reassemble it as seen from his. For example, to understand a given choice another makes, one must face in imagination the lack of choices which may confront and deny him. The well-fed are incapable of understanding the choices of the under-fed. The world has to be dismantled and re-assembled in order to be able to grasp, however clumsily, the experience of another.

Whereas imaginative metaphor meets detailed observation of the material world like this as he writes of a Turkish migrant working in a Cologne factory.

He begins to watch his arm, as if it were being moved by what it is holding instead of by his shoulder. He thinks of water pumping his arm. The moving pieces shift his eyes, the air breathes his lungs ... He knows that what he is doing is separate from any skill he has. He can stuff a saddle with straw. He has been told that the factory makes washing machines

This is a care-full practice for sure, made careful by this melding of the conceptual, the emotional, the material and the visual.

So, to finish. For Berger care is:

- To think feelingly and to feel thoughtfully.
- To speak with gentleness and kindness notwithstanding the fierceness of your argument
- To pause at length and to think slowly
- To listen with all the senses
- A radical hospitality, an offer of shelter, either literally or metaphorically.
- A tenderness that implicitly suggests invitation (Turney)

- To be suspicious of the monologue and of the declamatory.
- To practice endless curiosity with people, animals and materials
- To imagine that you will learn more by the end of a day than you did at the beginning
- To be in the moment, to be utterly present.
- To look with attention, thought, history and lightness.

Simon Murray

5th March 2017