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Another Way of Telling

by [Kat Avila](#)

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Publisher

Pantheon Books

<http://www.randomhouse.com/pantheon/>

Credits

Author: John Berger and Jean Mohr

ISBN: 0-394-51294-4

Illustrator:

Grade: 9

*NOTE: This review is more a digressive contemplation since I read ***Another Way of Telling*** to help me become a better comics reviewer (or reviewer of images). It's published here because one may find something useful for one's own purposes.*

The 1982 book ***Another Way of Telling*** is a joint effort by writer John Berger and photographer Jean Mohr to provoke the reader into thinking further about how photographs are read and interpreted and, at the same time, to introduce the peasant villagers Berger and Mohr have lived and worked amongst in the European Alps. The book is made up of five units: "Beyond my camera" images workshop by Jean Mohr; "Appearances" essay by John Berger on the historical and spatial isolation and ambiguous nature of a photographic image; "If each time..." with 150 photographs by Jean Mohr

arranged by both Berger and Mohr for a memory-like unfolding fiction of an every-peasant woman's thoughts as she reflects back on her life; "Stories" by Berger on what form a photographic narrative might take; and the two-page uncredited "Beginning" which poetically concludes their creative project.

"She will never see these photographs." (p. 13)

Photographer Jean Mohr is talking about the shots he has taken of a curious young neighbor who has come over to his sister's house in India to check him out. She is blind. For those of us who are comic readers, we take our reading for granted, not realizing that there is probably no satisfactory translation of the visuals for the sightless beyond "This is what I see" instead of "This is what I see and feel." The emotional impact of a picture or drawing, nor the connections it makes to the viewer's experience, cannot be adequately conveyed through words.

"Pointing his finger at a close-up of a cow's eye, he said categorically: 'That's no subject for a photo!'" (p. 22)

Marcel the cow herder had his own thoughts about the purpose and use of photographs, along the lines of they should be suitable as family keepsakes. What is valued is determined to a large extent by what is personally meaningful to us. To Mohr the photographer, the cow's eye and the field of variably shaded woolly textures it is set in are relevant for artistic and occupational reasons. However, the photograph is pointless to a cow herder for what makes the idea of "cow" or "Marquise the cow" understandable to him; he wants to see the entire head, even though he is able to identify the cow from the fifty he owns based only on Mohr's close-up.

Similarly, the comic reviewer employs a different yardstick from the creator and the fan. To a creator and his/her fan, a comic may rate a 10 on a 10-point scale (10 being the highest) because there's an existing predisposition to view it favorably, whereas to a reviewer the same comic may only rate half that because of occupationally skewed considerations (art style and competence, dialogue, storyline, reviewer vs. creator's cultural background/class, client status, etc.), personal satisfaction being only one, especially

for titles not chosen by the reviewer but forwarded for review. This explains in part the popularity of titles that despite critical reviews can still be a success in the marketplace, and vice versa. Reviews are more about the condition of the merchandise rather than saleability.

"And then I realized that you can't truly be on both sides of the fence at the same time." (p. 79)

When Mohr was hospitalized after an operation, it crossed his mind to survey his surroundings with his camera before wisely settling on simply experiencing the situation as the patient he was. Where comic reviews are concerned, you are either a fan or a reviewer. Reviews written in fan/cheerleader mode simply aren't as credible, having a tendency to overlook structural weaknesses; such reviews are written for the already converted.

"The photograph, irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, is given a meaning by the words. And the words, which by themselves remain at the level of generalisation, are given specific authenticity by the irrefutability of the photograph." (p. 92)

Berger is discussing the ambiguity of a photograph which is removed temporally and spatially from its original context. This reminds me of my experiences wrestling with original Korean manhwa, removed from me culturally and linguistically. I don't speak or read Korean, so with a basic idea of what a series is about, e.g., Kara and Yun-Hee Lee's *Angel Diary* (Ice Kunion, 2005), I make a guess as to what's happening based on the universal meanings of particular visual groupings or sequences. As the translated volumes become available, puzzling sections are clarified and the story gets fleshed out. There is this symbiotic relationship between the drawings and the dialogue; the spectator-reader can see what the characters are doing, but without the dialogue may not always understand the why or what they are thinking. The dialogue might be able to stand by itself, but it would be like listening to a porn movie but not watching it.

"Time in a drawing accrues according to human value." (p. 95)

One of the differences between photographs and drawings is time, writes Berger. One snaps a photograph, but develops a drawing, bringing to mind one of my biases as a reviewer. I don't like busy panels. Comic panels where least important elements are faded out are superior to those where one must visually pick out what's important. At this moment, I'm looking at a panel in Fuyumi Soryo's *ES: Eternal Sabbath* (Del Rey, 2006). There is a dead man lying on the sidewalk and two hapless bystanders kneeling a couple feet away. Ideally the nondescript background should have been faded to diminish its visual value. True, the panel is given added realism because a photograph would have captured it the same way, without separating out the meaningful foreground from the less meaningful background, because a photograph can only "quote" from appearances, as Berger expresses it.

He has mentioned earlier, "A drawing is a translation" (p. 93). Then my feeling is comics reflect the strength of the medium of drawing best when they move away from photographic realism, though I understand how a comic artist might want incorporate it to make a fiction more believable. Advertisements take advantage of that quality of photographs. The peasant woman in "If each time..." (pp. 131-275) seems more real than fiction because of the narrative's unfoldment through photographs; it's very easy to forget she is a fictional character in Berger and Mohr's story.

"No story is like a wheeled vehicle whose contact with the road is continuous. Stories walk, like animals or men. ... Every step is a stride over something not said." (pp. 284-85)

Each comic panel is a step toward a destination. There is a mystery of spaces, of what happens in-between panels. The discontinuities are filled by the spectator-reader's imagination in a movement synchronized with the panels and dialogue. The storytelling comic artist and the spectator-reader meet in the characters, a site where what the discontinuities represent are agreed upon. Berger expresses this relationship a bit differently and writes, "The discontinuities of the story and the tacit agreement underlying them fuse teller, listener and protagonists into an amalgam." I view the protagonists as conduits, not as participants; where Berger sees a cooperative fusion, I see a

seesaw or a tug-of-war between the storyteller's intent and the spectator-reader's expectations.

John Berger and Jean Mohr's ***Another Way of Telling*** ends with a haiku-like sequence recreating several cold mornings from November to February. The opposite page is filled up with the weather-and-time wrinkled visage of a peasant villager, perhaps a familiar face to the authors, but the authors ain't saying because that's the point of the book.

Written: June 13, 2006

Published: July 1, 2006

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