

Stuart Bailey

## Way of working

There's a handful of books designed by Richard Hollis that I've come to think of as a series, despite them having been made with a variety of authors and publishers over a period of ten years. They share a conversational charm; the tone is always easygoing and engaging, like having a serious drink with the author, accompanied by a carrier bag of sketchbooks, photographs or videos. The designer's role is not decorative but interpretive, translating the particularities of each writer's approach to their subject. That's not to say the results are visually neutral – they are definitely *Hollisian*. His presence is tangible but never intrusive.

Every graphic design job is the result of a peculiar tangle of relationships and conditions. It makes sense, then, to consider the work on these terms though they may be messy, vague, and not always easy to track down and write about. Casting around for a term to sum up the work of London studio Graphic Thought Facility, Emily King recently excavated 'ad hocism' from architectural theory, which set a few alarm bells ringing. Although perfectly descriptive of GTF's work, 'ad hoc' seemed to deserve wider consideration. The activity of designing is more *ad hoc* than most design writing suggests. *What really happened?* When graphic ideas appear to jump directly from the designer's mind to the printed page, weeks, months, years of accident, disagreement, theft and compromise are reduced to a thumbnail of concentrated style, ripe for plagiarism. It seems more accurate, interesting and generous to unravel the stories instead.

So, embracing likely amnesia, Hollis and I have informally – anecdotally – recounted the various processes at work to establish how these books arrived at their final state, and why they've shelved themselves together in my mind. First some facts, then some thoughts. The spreads, scanned actual size, are poor substitutes for the real things, which are fairly easy to find in second-hand shops or on the internet. **Ways of Seeing** has been regularly reissued, and is now an art school standard – though the demands of marketing have typically diluted the bold cover typography of each new edition.



# WAYS OF SEEING

Based on the BBC television series with  
**JOHN BERGER**

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.  
But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.



The Surrealist painter Magritte commented on this always-present gap between seeing and seeing in a painting called *The Key of Dreams*.  
The way we see things is affected by what we

The 'series' is rooted in a chance mid-1960s meeting with the artist, critic and novelist John Berger. At the time, Hollis was art editor of 'New Society', a weekly social and cultural commentary journal, for whom Berger was a regular contributor.

At a party, Hollis criticized a commentary Berger had made on an art TV programme, for being exaggeratedly Marxist. The ensuing argument/conversation, during which Berger discovered he had taught Hollis in a drawing class years before, resulted in his asking Hollis to help realize his fourth novel, *G*. Berger intended to illustrate this in the manner of André Breton's *Nadja* (1928), a novel that married text and images to the chronicle of a Parisian woman. An earlier Berger book, *A Fortunate Man* (1967) made a tentative step towards this in-between medium, drawing from both magazine and book conventions. Designed with Gerald Cinamon, it documented the life of a country doctor, the reportage punctuated with evocative photography.

In the end, the *G* collaboration never really developed past the inclusion of two small Berger illustrations, though there are notable experiments with spacing paragraphs relative to shifts in time, thought and meaning, which presuppose the filmic devices of their later work together. (Hollis remembers Berger as being 'the rare sort of writer who would be happy to cut or extend his text to fit a paragraph or page'.)

Berger had Hollis in mind for

**When a painting is reproduced by a film camera it inevitably becomes material for the film-maker's argument. A film which reproduces images of a painting leads the spectator, through the painting, to the film-maker's own conclusions. The painting lends authority to the film-maker.**



**This is because a film unfolds in time and a painting does not.**



**In a film the way one image follows another, their succession, constructs an argument which becomes irreversible.**



**In a painting all its elements are there to be seen simultaneously. The spectator may need time to examine each element of the painting but whenever he reaches a conclusion, the simultaneity of the whole painting is there to reverse or qualify his conclusion. The painting maintains its own authority.**

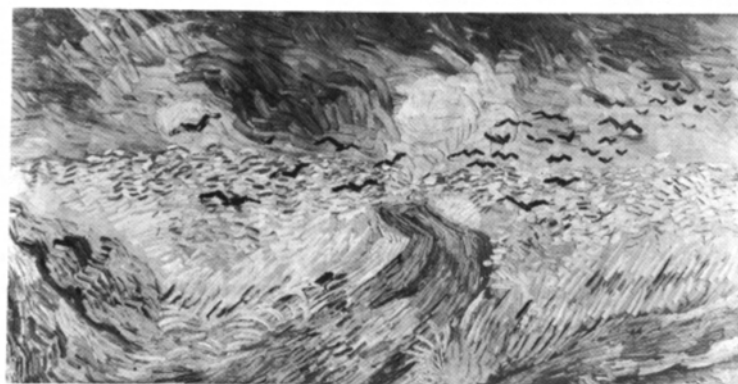
PROCESSION TO CALVARY BY BREUGHEL 1525-1569



**Paintings are often reproduced with words around them.**

**This is a landscape of a cornfield with birds flying out of it. Look at it for a moment. Then turn the page.**

WHEATFIELD WITH CROWS BY VAN GOGH 1853-1890



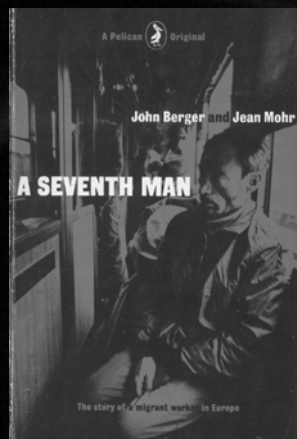
another book, tied in with the author's BBC TV series *Ways of Seeing*. This was an unprecedented approach to the public discussion of fine art, essentially an illustrated monologue exploring the idea of art as commodity and its relation to society. It was also an implicit critique of clichéd TV art coverage, which was based on the idea of an 'expert' visiting the great galleries, standing in front of a work and reeling off conventional art history.

The book version (1972) was made by an eccentric team of Berger's acquaintances, including Hollis as designer, and demonstrates the fruition of ideas bubbling under in Berger's earlier publications. The book begins on the cover, at once flagging its maverick character, and suggesting its outspoken point of view, reinforced by bold type throughout, image-only chapters, and dynamic ragged-right non-hyphenated text, broken and positioned to emphasize meaning. Images appear precisely where they are mentioned within the text, their size determined by first aligning the left edge on the large text indent, then centring, reinforcing the equal status of verbal and pictorial components. The idea was that printed text and image should approximate to Berger's voice-over in the TV episodes, almost like scrolling through a length of film while listening to the soundtrack.

The book deliberately avoids full captions with pictures (this involved a battle with copyright holders). Instead they are discreetly identified by title, artist's name and dates set vertically up the side, in order to discourage speed-reading images only, as well as avoid breaking the text flow. More detailed captions are pushed to the end of the book.

In an introductory note, Berger wrote: 'The form of the book is as much to do with our purpose as the arguments contained within it' and 'Our principal aim has been to start a process of questioning'.



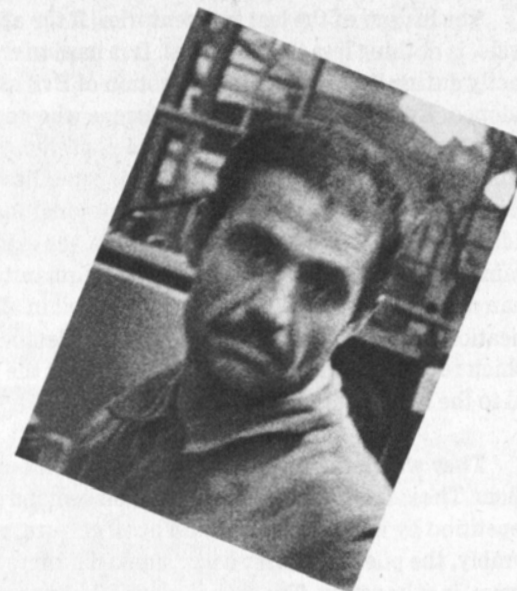


another. To talk of entering the other's subjectivity is misleading. The subjectivity of another does not simply constitute a different interior attitude to the same exterior facts. The constellation of facts, of which he is the centre, is different.

He is taught his work. When he can do it, he will earn £40 a week if he works overtime. He watches the gestures made and he learns to imitate them. Words would involve somebody speaking his language.



Modern mass production presupposes that most of the labour involved in it is unskilled. In the mid-twenties Henry Ford declared that 79 per cent of his workers could learn their job in eight days, and that 43 per cent of them could do so in one day. It is the same today.



ROAD TO VILLAGE IN SPAIN



After the success of the *Ways of Seeing* process, Berger asked Hollis to design a subsequent work, *A Seventh Man* (1975).

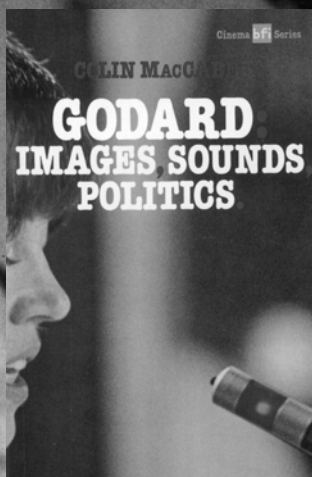
Jean Mohr's stark documentary photographs were given equal billing with Berger's texts, to form a simultaneously personal and political account of the plight of migrant workers in continental Europe.

The loose, seemingly improvised layout immediately recalls *Ways of Seeing*'s reflexive train of thought, and, like the previous book's proximity to TV, *A Seventh Man* mimics documentary film, juxtaposing photographs with poetry, statistics, diagrams and incidental items where appropriate (a photo ripped in half, a blank non-image, a till receipt, a detail from one image isolated and enlarged, etc.) where appropriate. The editing is as vital and present as the content, and the choices in selecting from and combining this compendium of rhetorical devices is always based on avoiding redundancy. Again, Berger makes a point of explaining the design at the beginning:

'The book consists of images and words. Both should be read in their own terms. Only occasionally is an image used to illustrate the text. The photographs [...] say things which are beyond the reach of words. The pictures in sequence make a statement: a statement which is equal and comparable to, but different from, that of the text.'

Hollis disagrees: 'Some images ARE direct illustrations of the text. Indeed, they sometimes seem to prompt a new point in Berger's argument.'





to earn his living by using his technical skills to make advertising films is to avoid the reality of oppression and struggle at the level of his work. This evasion of the political is impossible and it is this lesson that Fonda drives home in the central scene in the film when, after their return to Paris, they have a row. Montand wants to divide his life into different compartments. Fonda, however, realises that such a division is impossible, that personal relations cannot be divorced from the other practices with which they are articulated. In short, that one can understand subjectivity only in terms of class.

But, and here we come to the paradox of the film, if the film analyses the struggles that dominate our life in terms of an economic base and its inadequate political representation, it has no analysis of that economic base nor of the dominant political representations. If we must understand subjectivity in terms of class, the content of the notion of class is reduced to the slogan 'it is right to rebel'. That economic analysis is joined to a political one in which the only representative of struggle at the level of politics is a communist party which is seen as nothing more than a repressive fiction. If *Tout va bien* is a truly remarkable political film in that it introduces its audience to some of the ideological and social struggles that composed France four years after 1968 (and this marks its superiority to *British Sounds* or *Pravda* which rarely, if ever, manage to articulate the struggles in Britain or Czechoslovakia), there is no place in the film to include the fact that the contemporaneous signing of the Common Programme by the parties of the left was to provide a political focus for those ideological and political struggles over the next five years.

This weakness is exemplified in the third section, 'France Today', in which the lessons of the film are spelt out at a national level. Images and sounds of revolt from throughout France are followed by images and sounds of consumption as Fonda visits one of the huge hypermarkets situated on the outskirts of towns which had just begun to open in the early 1970s. If the use of the camera had prevented many of the traditional identifications we experience in the cinema, the organisation of the narrative still privileges one view. In the factory it is the strikers: their personal appearance, their relaxed manner of speaking and their obvious solidarity contrast with the repressed and repressive appearance of the manager and the shop



The manager of the factory being timed for a visit to the toilet by one of the strikers.



From *Tout va bien*



From *Tout va bien*

conclusion of *Tout va bien* runs through all the Dziga-Vertov films and is present before then in *La Chinoise* and *Weekend*. At the time of its appearance *La Chinoise* was virulently attacked by Maoists, whose principal objection was that the emphasis on terrorism at the end of the film was in total contradiction with the political analysis provided by Maoism. But Godard's analysis has, in the long run, proved more accurate than it seemed at the time. Terrorism was in contradiction with traditional Leninist emphases and with Mao Tse-tung's teaching. However, Western Maoism's rejection of all intermediate economic and political demands and the subsequent inevitability of betrayal by the delegate provided by the union or the communist party did often leave violence as the only political strategy. Much of the glorification of the violence in these films is objectionable. Nevertheless, ten years later, when a pessimistic view might discern terrorism as the only visible heritage of

On the basis of seeing the Berger work, fiery Cambridge academic Colin MacCabe approached Hollis to design this structuralist analysis of Jean-Luc Godard (1980). The book was initially developed by the author and designer watching the films together (Hollis's knowledge of French was a huge advantage).

Throughout the book, sequences of stills from these sittings punctuate the text, set in a justified column which contracts and expands to accommodate them. Footage is used grammatically, with repetition, jump-cuts and obscure juxtapositions that echo Godard's own wild inventiveness. Such graphic logic is also worked out typographically: the voices of Godard and his characters always appear in bold to MacCabe's roman, for example, and the author's occasional notes are stuffed into gaps between columns, as if scrawled directly onto the page. The book was typeset as soon as MacCabe produced his text, chapter by chapter. Hollis pasted up the type with screened bromide prints of the images, in some instances line by line.

The main body of analysis is sandwiched by an opening title sequence that juxtaposes quotations and contemporary film images (bringing the reader up to date with the myth of the then-reclusive Godard), and a closing title sequence that reproduces a section of one of Godard's collaged pictorial storyboard-scripts. Other screen conventions were appropriated. American Typewriter, the standard subtitling font at the time, was used on the cover, for page numbers and chapter titles — reversed white out of black in TV-format boxes.



# HUMPHREY JENNINGS: FILM-MAKER, PAINTER, POET.

Contributions by  
Lindsay Anderson  
Charles Butler  
David Butler  
Kathleen Ryan  
The Youngbloods  
with an introduction by Sir Richard Proust

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owning, *Home-Thoughts, from the Sea*  
ling, *The Beginnings*  
archill, Speech of 4 June 1940  
coln, Gettysburg Address  
da (8) consists of a tracking shot,  
panied only by music (Handel's  
Music').  
amestills reproduced here are  
ed to illustrate the relation of sound  
ge, either within a sequence (2, 3  
across a cut (5), or over the  
on of a single shot (7).



2 'I see her as an eagle...'



'... the noise of timorous and flocking birds



3 'I will not cease...'



'Till we have built...'



an, one glorious blood-red'



5 'When time shall count from the date'



'When the English began to hate'



6 'We shall go on to the end...'



'We shall never surrender'

A couple of years later, Hollis was asked by the British Film Institute to design a monograph on Humphrey Jennings, a film-maker best known for his austere, unsentimental wartime documentaries.

This book (1982) has much in common with the previous three, both in terms of subject matter (a monograph about a cross-disciplinary artist, significantly involved in experimental

film) and technique (combining reproductions of numerous visual and textual media). Like the Godard book, here Hollis had a key editorial role, scanning the film archive and selecting



7 'And that government of the people by the people and for the people...'



'... shall not perish from the earth'



8

**1942.** Location shooting on the Fire Service film began in February and continued through to April. In June, the Germans massacred the citizens of the mining village of Lidice, Czechoslovakia and it was suggested to the Ministry of Information, possibly by the Czech government in exile, that a film be made to commemorate the village, which had been totally obliterated. In August, Jennings went to Wales to look for a suitable location and settled on the mining village of Cwmgiedd, near Ystradgynlais. By the beginning of September, Jennings and his unit had moved into Cwmgiedd and were living with mining families, rather than in a local hotel, and location shooting in Wales was completed by the end of the year. His return to London coincided with a major row on a proposal to cut **Fires Were Started** drastically, in order to conform with the demands of the commercial distributors.

## London 1942

London has settled down to a big village-like existence. Most of the damage demolished and cleared up. Endless allotments — beds of potatoes, onions, lettuces in parks, in the new open spaces from bombing, tomatoes climbing — trees and shrubs overgrowing evacuated and empty houses and gardens: places shells of eighteenth century cottages with black windows and Rousseau forest enveloping them, straying out over the road — no railings — climbing windows.

Elsewhere the utmost tidiness and care in lines of planting on allotment sites, aerodromes, fire stations. The parks and gardens open to all, all right gone. There is of course very widespread exasperation about the Second Front, partly political but more unspoken impatience and shame — the more so because the country realises that it has been working hard and sacrificing. I should theoretically be very tired at the end of a picture but I don't think I do: I don't think it's work so much as war... or maybe it's middle-age but I don't feel aged, on the contrary — younger than ever. There is nothing so exhilarating as seeing even a few ideas one has long had really coming into being on the screen.

Letter to Cicely Jennings / 28 July 1942

relevant stills. This time, however, he was without an immediate working group or partner (Jennings's daughter edited the text from a distance), so was left with the full responsibility of piecing together a

(typo)graphic story to support the verbal. Of the four, this is perhaps the most fully formed, drawing heavily from the experiment and exploration of the previous three, recycling and refining ideas

to result in a confident well-rounded impression of its subject. The final result feels less screen-based, more like an intense scrapbook.



Having worked with Hollis off and on over the past few years, it's easy enough to trace a number of personal characteristics in the work. Not that personality in graphic design is unusual, but still it's notable how in Hollis's case eccentricities always seem beneficial rather than gratuitous, helping the content along rather than obstructing it. The most significant of these is his tendency in conversation to go off on a barely related tangent and end up miles away, which is duly mirrored in the sense of improvisation these books share. Form reacts organically to content, following a stubborn, childlike – but by no means childish – logic. After deciding that the visual weight of the **Ways of Seeing** text should equal that of the images, for instance, Hollis set the entire book in bold Univers 65 – two fingers up at the sort of well-mannered book design maintained by Penguin's chief designer at the time, Hans Schmoller. The first time Schmoller saw a copy of **Ways of Seeing** he pitched it down the corridor in fury, and the twinkle in Hollis's eye as he tells this story points to a couple of other qualities at work: a casual disregard for authority, and a buoyant sense of humour.

**Ways of Seeing** was made by a team of five: an author (Berger), a designer (Hollis), an artist (Sven Blomberg), a producer (Michael Dibb) and a 'critical friend' (Chris Fox), with vague roles and plenty of room for maneuver. I have an image of them gathered together for the first time, like the Usual Suspects, initially suspicious of each other, then unavoidably holed up in a claustrophobic studio for a few weeks. Hollis confirms this isn't too far from the truth, describing the process on one occasion as 'trying to make sense of each others' ideas' and on another as 'trying to make sense of Sven's bloody collages' – sheets of juxtaposed images cut from books and magazines. When an exasperated Hollis suggested that he had trouble understanding the point being made by one such collage, Blomberg retorted that it was 'fackin' obvious!' and stormed out onto the balcony to sulk. If ways of seeing weren't always eye-to-eye, the democratic spirit holds in Berger's insistence that the royalties from the first printing were split equally five ways.

The series reflects a mutual trust between designer and authors/editors. This trail of work developed because the commissioning parties in each case had recognized Hollis's previous work and interest. In each case a relationship was established on the basis of his approach. Because of this implicit understanding, the shared wavelength, the final product ends up greater than the sum of its constituent contributors. An intense working relationship results from a joint search for the best means of communicating ideas, through familiarity with the subject matter and the author's relation to it. Rather than the books being editor- or designer-led, they push for a third, uncharted way. Other examples that come to mind are the various collaborations between Marshall McLuhan & Quentin Fiore, and recently Rem Koolhaas & Bruce Mau, in which form and content end up similarly symbiotic. As such, they demonstrate a sort of truth-is-stranger-than-fiction aesthetic. An open mind and a willingness to draw form from content, dismissing convention and personal stylistic agendas, results in work more visually radical than a purely formalistic approach where radicality itself is the main aim. In an article on

Hollis called 'The New Tradition', Robin Kinross pinpointed this, describing his subject as 'inventive rather than innovative'. These books *feel* rather than look the same precisely because they share an approach rather than a style.

It's almost too obvious to point out that these books pre-empted digital multimedia, being collections of disparate material combined to articulate a story or argument. The then-infant influence of TV is all-pervasive, most obviously in the quick-cut documentary-style editing that results in their unusually animated narratives. With the exception of **A Seventh Man**, the books are fundamentally *about* film in one form or another, so Hollis's appropriation of the medium's techniques is especially apt, working under the influence of a few similarly cinematic works such as French documentarian Chris Marker's **Commentaires**. The books also flag up certain process similarities *across* media, like real ink-on-ink over-printing, jump-cuts in film, or a band ending a song at the same moment – all of which seem fundamentally connected in the same way that 'opposite' techniques like fake overprinting, graduated tints, or fade-outs in film and music are. Again these former qualities seem to describe (and this sounds a lot better in my head than it does on paper) an aesthetic of truth.

Tellingly, these books were made between the late 1960s and early 1980s, when layouts were typically made by cutting blocks of text from one long typeset 'galley'. The two Berger books were made by drawing approximations of the pictures, with proofs of the texts stuck down onto same-size flat layout sheets. The pages were later reconstructed from these instructions by the printer, a process that involved a certain amount of juggling and guesswork. In contrast, while the later Godard and Jennings books were also constructed on double-page templates, the typesetting and images were always final 'camera-ready' versions. This paste-up was eventually photographed to make film from which printing plates were made. Therefore, this process was much more precise. Resizing images or changing type characteristics were prohibitively expensive, so decisions had to be fixed at an early stage, which explains some odd features. In the Godard book, for instance, paragraphs intended to carry images were made thinner before knowing the exact number of stills to be used, creating erratic gaps.

Compared with current page make-up software and production techniques, paste-up is a fundamentally different way of working that affects the outcome in a number of ways: 1. *Focus*. The nature of paste-up means that decisions must be made sooner (and stuck with) unlike DTP, where work can be – and so always is – changed up until the last minute; 2. *Tactility*. Paste-up is physical. The production process involves three-dimensional ink on paper rather than two-dimensional light on screen, so the designer is always working closer to the reality of the final object; and 3. *Pace*. Paste-up occurs at a slower, more human rate. Although having long since acquired an Apple Mac, it's notable that Hollis still uses his old wax glue machine. Wax is fundamentally different from spray glue because it can be repeatedly removed and re-stuck, allowing the work to stay open-minded and *breathe*.