

## **A Listening Eye: The Films of Mike Dibb**

### **Part One: The Play of Ideas**

**Available to view 8-14 January 2021**

Once upon a time there was a great filmmaker... Let's kick things off for the first week of *A Listening Eye* with Mike Dibb's most famous work. *Ways of Seeing* - 50 years old next year - revolutionised how millions of people saw Art and its relation to Society. Booker prize-winner and programme host John Berger, with his trademark major shirt action, put big ideas into millions of sitting rooms and it's surely the most important art documentary ever made.

Mike and John were regular collaborators after that, and we're also showing their powerful and innovative films about time and storytelling, along with our relationships to animals, seen from the latter's point of view...

#### **About Time 1983-85 / 6 x 52'**

Co-devised and directed with Chris Rawlence, about the meaning, experience and our conflicting ideas of 'time': 'Time is Money', 'Time and a Half', 'Holy Days', 'Moonshine', 'Uncertain Times' and 'Once Upon a Time – with John Berger'.

**Once upon a Time** was filmed entirely in different spaces in and around John Berger's house in the Haute Savoie in France. It's a moving and unusual meditation on our experience of time, as revealed through a careful selection of contrasting and thought provoking time-centred 'stories', both old and new. And whether written by him or others, all were read by John and beautifully edited, using only the filmed images of things found inside the house in books or on the walls, or outside in the surrounding countryside and nearest town.

#### **Pig Earth 1979 / 50'**

This marked John Berger's first return to television after *Ways of Seeing*. The film, boldly using mostly still photographs, is based on John's book of the same name, which was both a work of fiction as well as a history of French Peasant experience, as told by John 'the story teller', as if in the peasant's own voices. All of which was given brilliant visual expression in the film through a series of beautifully edited sequences, each constructed from vivid and moving photographs of peasants and their lives, in black and white and colour, by John's friend and long-time collaborator, the Swiss photographer Jean Mohr.

#### **Parting Shots from Animals 1980 / 60'**

This was inspired by essays by John Berger and developed in collaboration with Chris Rawlence. Shot entirely in the UK, it consists of a diverse series of arresting 'films within a film', each presented as if made about us from the perspective of the animals whose lives we may appear to celebrate, but continue to exploit and to destroy. While John Berger doesn't appear in the film and wasn't directly involved in its making, he narrates to great effect the text he co-wrote to accompany the film's provocative opening sequence.

#### **Ways of Seeing 1972 / 4 x 30'**

The hugely provocative and influential BAFTA award-winning (1972, Best Specialised Series) four part TV series with John Berger that was subsequently turned into the best-selling book that's still in print. The films, foreign editions of the book and related memorabilia were featured in Tate Britain's exhibition "Ways of Seeing - revisited" (March-July 2005).

*Part One:* This first film (and indeed its form) was inspired by Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that had recently appeared in an English translation in 1968. The formal challenge was to turn Benjamin's very dense essay into a playful and accessible filmic exploration of the many ways in which the reproduction of paintings and art objects from the past had released them from their original fixed bearings into a fluid world of potential new contexts in which their meanings could be subtly and powerfully changed, according to where and how they could be seen, on postcards or in domestic settings, by what could be written and said about them in countless books and catalogues, by their relationship to other images with which they could be juxtaposed, and by the music that could be played over them in numerous documentaries, including this one!

*Part Two:* This second film set out to question the way women had been seen and represented in European paintings, with particular regard to the ways they'd been depicted within the tradition of "The Nude". The programme consisted of two parts. In the first we constructed a short 15' film around a new text by John, mainly drawn from various previous things he'd written, including his soon to be published Booker prize-winning novel "G". This was then shown to five feminist writers and friends (identified at the end of the film and including John's then wife Anya) whose spontaneous and articulate first responses were immediately recorded in a lively filmed conversation, which originally lasted around 50 minutes (and was best at this length), but which we had to edit down to 15 minutes to keep within the designated 30 minute length of the programme.

*Part Three:* This was the only film in the series to be directly developed from a pre-existing Berger essay, in this case his provocative introduction to Howard Daniel's "Encyclopaedia of Themes and Subjects in Painting", in which John looked critically at the tradition and function of European easel painting from roughly the 15th to the 19th century. The film considerably developed and refined this essay's analysis of class and power and the role of the spectator/owner, in particular demonstrating how the special qualities of oil paint had made it possible to render people and their clothes, houses, possessions and landscapes luminously and almost tangibly 'real', to the point where this metaphorical appropriation of the material world, ie the framed oil painting itself, would ultimately (and ironically) become the most valuable object of all.

*Part Four:* The subject matter of this last film was in fact not decided upon until the series was already on its way. Our first notion had been to deconstruct the concept of 'National Heritage', but truthfully I was somewhat concerned that we hadn't yet found a satisfactory filmic form for this idea...when suddenly a light bulb moment happened. Indeed it happened by chance when John, after travelling on the train to have dinner one evening in Richmond with his old 'Monitor' benefactor Huw Wheldon, rang me to say he'd observed how many of the seductive tropes and traditions of European painting seemed to have ended up in some of the images of advertising he'd been looking at along the way. Did I think that would make a better subject for the last film? Of course it took me no time at all to say yes, and with some relief we immediately got to work on this much more fruitful idea. Of course many hours of looking through books of paintings, travelling the tube, noting down billboards and shop window displays and browsing through endless magazines still needed to be done to validate the thesis...but so was born possibly the most original film in the series. In particular we realised how colour photography now played exactly the same role as oil paint once had, with it's ability to render the world and everything in it visually alluring and desirable...and thus the perfect medium for advertisers who wanted to make purchase of the desirable always seem possible.