

# 1 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

## INTRODUCTION

Published in 1972 and based on a BBC television programme of the same name, this is a very influential text on art criticism. Although the book and programme make the same case, they do so in slightly different ways, and the programme is well worth watching. For the photographer, the book has the advantage of putting photography in the context of western art. For the student new to critical theory, it has the advantage of being produced for a mass audience, and has as a central aim the de-mystification of art. These two points make it relatively easy to understand. A further advantage this book has is that many students have not had the opportunity to study photography, but have studied art, and so the book presents a logical progression for them when they start to study photography.

The television programme is divided into four sections and although the book is divided into seven chapters (three being made up solely of images), the book also covers four areas. The summary is of three of the four written chapters.

**Chapter 1.** In this chapter, Berger points out what is involved in seeing, and how the way we see things is determined by what we know. He goes on to argue that the real meaning of many images has been obscured by academics, changed by photographic reproduction and distorted by monetary value.

**Chapter 3.** In this chapter, Berger shows how the nude in western art systematically objectified women, and how this tradition has been continued by photography.

**Chapter 5.** Here, Berger argues that oil painting has, because of its realism, a powerful link to ownership and the buying power of money, and so often celebrates the power of money. This chapter is not summarised.

**Chapter 7.** In this chapter, Berger further develops the link between ownership and art by critically looking at modern consumerist society and 'publicity' or advertising photography.

## WAYS OF SEEING: CHAPTER 1

### Seeing

Berger starts by trying to explain the relationship between words and what we see. He points out that seeing and recognition come before words. It is seeing that establishes our place in the world, but we use words to explain this world. Despite this he argues there is always a distinction between what we see and what we know. The example he gives is that of us seeing the sun revolving around the earth but knowing the opposite.

Having established that we see first and then use words to explain the world, i.e. what we know, he then goes on to say what we know or believe affects the way we see things. This makes it a dynamic relationship; it may start with seeing and recognition, but develops into a system in which our past experience or knowledge changes the way we see things. For example, today we would see fire differently from people in the Middle Ages who believed in the physical reality of hell.

The act of seeing is active; it is an act of choice. We see what we look at and so relate to it. We also become aware that we can be seen, and so are aware we are part of the visible world. This results in the understanding that others may see things differently. This two-way (reciprocal) nature of vision comes before dialogue.

### The Image

For Berger, 'An image is a sight which has been recreated or reproduced . . . which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance . . .' (p. 9). This detachment can be great or small, but all images, including photographs, involve a way of seeing by the person who has created the image. Further, when we look at someone else's image, our understanding of it depends on our way of seeing.

Berger argues that images were first made to represent something that was not there, and later acquired an extra level of meaning by lasting longer than the original subject. The image now showed how the subject had once looked to other people. Later still, with the increasing consciousness of the individual, the image was recognised as the particular vision of a particular artist. Nothing else documents the past so well, and the more imaginative the work, the more we can understand the artist's experience of the world. Unfortunately, when images from the past are presented as works of art, their meanings are obscured (mystified) by learnt assumptions such as beauty, truth, form etc. Our understanding of history will

always change as we change. However, this cultural mystification results both in making the images seem more remote, and allows us to draw fewer conclusions from history.

When we see art from the past, we have the opportunity to place ourselves in history. The mystification is an attempt to prevent us from really seeing the image and so deprives us of our history. For Berger, this has been done deliberately ‘... because a privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes ...’ (p. 11).

Berger gives as an example two paintings by Frans Hals; one of the Regents and the other of the Regentesses of the Old Men’s Alms House. At the time of painting, Hals was a destitute old man dependent on the charity of people whose portraits he now painted. Berger quotes from an authoritative art history that evaluates the paintings purely in terms of their formal elements, using phrases such as ‘... harmonious fusion ... unforgettable contrast ... powerful whites ...’ (p. 13). The history goes further and argues against the viewer thinking they can understand the personalities of the people portrayed. For Berger, this is mystification and he argues we can have an understanding of the personalities ‘... because it corresponds to our own observations of people ... [and] ... we still live in a society of comparable social relations and moral value’ (p. 14). For Berger, the relationship of the personalities, the destitute old painter and the people on whose charity he depends on is the essence of the painting.

### **The impact of photography**

From the Renaissance onwards, perspective in art converged on the single spectator, who could only be in one place at a time. The implication was that images were timeless. Photography, in particular the movie camera, changed this. What you saw depended on your place in time and space. The camera changed the way artists saw. Impressionists saw the visible in continuous change [as the light changed so did the appearance of the object] and Cubists no longer recognised a single vantage point [so, for example, they would paint a face with an eye seen from one vantage point and the nose from another].

A second major impact was to destroy the uniqueness of images. Prior to photography, images were an integral part of a building, and as a result this was a part of the images’ meaning. Even if the image could be moved, there was always only one image. By reproducing the image, the camera multiplies and breaks up its meaning. It can be shown on your own lounge wall, on the television, or on a T-shirt.

To argue that the reproductions will always lack something still leaves problems, because the uniqueness no longer resides in the meaning of the image, but in its unique physical existence. Its value lies now not so much in what it says but in its rarity and the price it would fetch. There is a conflict here because art is thought to be above commerce. Those who mystify art respond by claiming that the commercial value reflects the spiritual value; yet in modern society, religion is not the living force it once was. What determines an image's value is not its meaning or quality of painting, but its uniqueness, and Berger cites the example of two almost identical paintings of the *Virgin of the Rocks* by Leonardo da Vinci. One is at the National Gallery and other at the Louvre. In both institutions, their art historians' prime concern is not the meaning of the image but to prove that their image is the original and the other, the copy. Likewise, certain images take on new importance when their value increases. To hide this link between artistic value and market value, a false sense of religiosity is given to these works, so alienating most people from art.

Reproduction detaches the meaning from a painting, and its meaning is to a greater or lesser degree changed. By selecting a part of an allegorical painting for example, it can be transformed into a portrait. A filmmaker can construct an argument by selecting parts of a painting and presenting them in a particular order. Presented with the painting itself, the viewer takes in the whole image in an instant, and, even when looking at a specific area, can always refer to the whole.

The juxtaposition of words and images also changes the meaning. The meaning of an image will change depending on its context. The image could be used in advertising, often reconfirming the mystification of art, or someone could pin a reproduction on his or her pin-board, seeing something very personal in the image.

Berger still sees a value in the original image. The original is silent and has traces of the painter's actions, creating a closeness between the painter and the viewer, so making the painting, in a sense, contemporary.

Berger feels a total approach to art is needed, one that relates art to everyone's experience, including the innocently spontaneous and that of the art specialists. Art no longer exists as it did. It was once isolated, part of a hierarchy, but now images of art are available and insubstantial. Yet it is still presented to people in a mystified way and so alienates them, cutting them off from their history and making art a political issue.

## **WAYS OF SEEING: CHAPTER 3, THE NUDE**

### **The social presence of men and women**

Berger points out that traditionally, men and women have different types of social presence. Men are measured by the degree of power they offer. The power may be in any number of forms, for example moral, physical, economic etc. A man's presence suggests what he may or may not be able to do to or for you. In contrast to this, a woman's presence indicates what can or cannot be done to her. Every thing she does contributes to her presence. She is born into the keeping of men, and from childhood is taught to survey herself, with the result that her being is split into two, the surveyed and the surveyor. Her own sense of being is replaced by a sense of being appreciated by others – ultimately men. He acts, she appears, and she watches herself being looked at. 'The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.' (p. 47).

### **The nude in oil painting**

Berger points out that women are the main subject in one category of European oil painting – the nude. The nude reveals how women have been seen and judged as sights. The first nudes in this tradition illustrate the story of Adam and Eve, usually as a series of images similar to a cartoon. For Berger, there are two important elements to this story. Firstly, having eaten the apple they see each other in a different way, so nakedness was in the eye of the beholder. Secondly, the woman is blamed and made subservient to the man by way of punishment.

During the Renaissance the story disappeared, and instead a single moment was shown, usually the moment of shame. However, the shame is directed more at the viewer than towards each other. Gradually, the shame became a kind of display. Even when secular subjects began to be used, the implication that the woman was aware of being seen by the spectator remained. As a result she was not naked in her own right but naked as the (male) viewer saw her.

Berger gives a range of examples. Nudes looking at the viewer looking at them; of women looking in mirrors joining in the spectacle of themselves; or of looking into mirrors and being accused of vanity, when in reality they are only satisfying men's desire to see them naked; and of women's beauty being judged. Common to all of these images is the sense of the woman being watched; by men in the painting; by herself; by the spectator towards whom her body is often turned.

Often, she looks at the spectator looking at her. Her nakedness is not an expression of her own feelings but that of the male viewer. This is in marked contrast to the art of other cultures where nakedness is not so passive and has a degree of sexual equality.

At the time Berger produced *Ways of Seeing*, the most authoritative study of the nude was Kenneth Clark's *The Nude*. Clark distinguishes between nakedness and nudity. For him, to be naked is simply to be without clothes. It has nothing to do with art. The nude, on the other hand, is an art form. The subject may be naked people, but the way they are painted makes them nudes, i.e. a way of seeing. [Berger does not make it clear, but Clark's main concern was to deny the sexuality of the nude.]

Berger develops this distinction. 'To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude.'

In the average oil painting of the nude, the main character is never painted; this is the male spectator for whom everything has been done. Berger illustrates this point with the *Allegory of Time and Love* by Bronzino. In the painting, Cupid is kissing Venus, yet the way their bodies are arranged have nothing to do with them kissing. Her body has been contorted to present itself to the male viewer of the painting. The picture appeals to his sexuality, it has nothing to do with hers. The image conforms to another European convention, that of not painting body hair on women. This is because hair suggests power and passion, and the male spectator must feel these are his characteristics.

There are exceptions to the tradition, and Berger points out the characteristics paintings need, to be '... paintings of loved women, more or less naked' (p. 57), rather than nudes. They need to transcend the moment, because for Berger, in a lived sexual experience, nakedness is a process rather than a state, so an image of any instant runs the risk of distortion. The images must be subjective, and finally they must have an element of banality (ordinariness).

European humanism, which entails a strong sense of the individual, was a strong influence on European thinking during this time, yet the nude denied the individualism of the women portrayed. The reason for this was the contradictory interests of those involved in a painting: the patron, the artist and the model. Dürer, for example, believed the ideal nude ought to be constructed out of the parts of various bodies, so denying any sense of the individual at all. The spirit of individualism allowed some artists to resolve this contradiction, but the tradition as a whole did not.

Despite the notion of the ideal nude being broken by Manet's Olympia, and replaced by the realism of the prostitute, the unequal relationship exploited by oil painting is still deeply embedded in our culture and shapes the thinking of many women. Today, the attitudes that created the nude can be seen in the mass media, and '... the essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed' (p. 64). The ideal spectator is still male and the image is designed to flatter him.

## **WAYS OF SEEING: CHAPTER 7, PUBLICITY**

### **The effect of publicity images**

For Berger, the term 'publicity images' has the same meaning as 'advertising images'. He points out that they surround us, and that this is unique to modern society. These visual messages last only for a moment, both in terms of how long we look at them and in terms of how frequently they need to be updated. Despite this, they do not refer to the present but to the future.

We see these images so frequently we now take them for granted. Although we usually pass these images, we have the sense of them continually passing us, so they are seen as dynamic and we seem static.

These images are justified in terms of an economic system that, in theory, benefits the public (the consumer), by stimulating consumption and as a result, the economy. Although tied to the concept of free choice, the freedom to buy this brand or another, the whole system of publicity is based on one proposal: that we can change our lives for the better if we buy something. Despite having spent our money, our lives will be richer by possessing more.

### **Envy, glamour and publicity**

Berger sees a relationship between envy, glamour and publicity. Publicity shows us people whose lives have been transformed by consumption and so have become enviable. Being enviable makes the person glamorous, and publicity manufactures glamour.

Publicity starts by working on the natural appetite for pleasure, something that is real. It does not, however, offer the pleasure as it is. Rather it promises happiness, happiness gained by being envied by others, and this is glamour. It is not therefore offering the pleasure in itself. The better the publicity, the more the spectator is aware of what they are missing. Yet this glamour is very solitary.

Being envied depends on your not sharing your experience with those that envy you. This explains the impersonal and unfocused look of many glamour images.

The buyers imagine themselves transformed by buying the product and envy this transformed self. In effect, the publicity image has lowered the spectators' self-esteem and offers it back if they buy the product.

### **The relationship between oil painting and publicity images**

There is a direct relationship between oil painting and publicity images, which has been obscured by cultural prestige. Publicity images often make direct reference to past art, either by copying it in some way, or by incorporating the art into the publicity image. This 'quoting' of art achieves two things. Art is associated with wealth and beauty, and the publicity image benefits from this. Art also has cultural authority, which makes it superior to mere materialism. This use of art allows the publicity image to promote two almost contradictory things, spiritual or cultural refinement and consumerism. Publicity understands the link in oil painting between the work of art and the spectator-owner and uses these to flatter the spectator-buyer.

There is, however, a much deeper link to oil painting. The composition and visual signs used are very similar. Berger cites a list of examples:

The models' gestures

The romantic use of nature with connotations of innocence

The use of the Mediterranean

Stereotypical women, e.g. serene mother (madonna), hostess (spectator-owner's wife), sex-object (Venus)

Materials indicating luxury (metal, fur, leather etc.)

The frontal arrangement of lovers for the benefit of the viewer

The sea, suggesting new life

Wealth and virility conveyed by the stance of men

Perspective used to offer mystery

Drinking equated with success

The mounted knight as motorist.

For Berger, publicity is the culture of the consumer society and there are reasons why it draws on oil painting:

Firstly, oil painting celebrated private property; it expressed the idea that you are what you have. For this reason, publicity has not replaced post-Renaissance art, it is an extension of it.

Secondly, it is nostalgic because its references to quality are bound to the past and the traditional. If it spoke in contemporary terms it would be neither confident nor credible.

Thirdly, it exploits the traditional education of the average spectator-buyer. Publicity does not need to make specific or accurate historical references; in fact it is preferable that it does not.

Fourthly, colour photography and oil painting are very similar in their ability to produce a sense of tactile reality to the spectator, reinforcing the sense of actually owning the thing (in the case of the spectator-owner), or the possibility of owning it (in the case of the spectator-buyer).

There is a fundamental difference between oil painting and publicity. Oil painting starts with facts, i.e. he already owns what is shown. It confirms the status of the spectator-owner and boosts his ego. Publicity diminishes the spectator-owner's ego, it makes him dissatisfied with his life (but not society). The spectator-owner made money out of the market, the spectator-buyer is the market and has money made out of him at two levels, as a worker and then as a buyer.

Publicity works on the fear that if you have nothing you are nothing. To overcome this anxiety, the consumer must have money. 'Money is life . . . in the sense that it is the token of and key to every human capacity. The power to spend money is the power to live.' (p. 143).

Oil painting gave a permanent record of a real, successful present to be passed down to future generations. For publicity, the present has to be insufficient. The short-lived publicity image claims not that you are desirable or successful, but that you will be. Sexuality is used, either explicitly or implicitly, by publicity to sell things. The message it conveys is that being able to buy is the same as being sexually desirable, or loveable.

### **Function of publicity**

How does publicity remain credible if it never delivers happiness? It does so by being relevant to the fantasies of the spectator-buyer, so again it is divorced from reality.

Berger returns to the notion of glamour, which he states is a modern invention. In the past, there were notions of grace and elegance etc. but these were in essence different. People portrayed with these characteristics were not dependent on other people's envy to have these characteristics.

For glamour to exist, envy needs to be a widespread emotion. Berger argues that the industrial society creates the right conditions for this to happen, as it is not yet fully democratic. It recognises the right of individuals to pursue individual happiness, yet it creates a situation where the individual feels powerless. The individual is trapped between what he is and what he would like to be. There are two responses to this: the individual remains subject to envy and feelings of helplessness and escapes by day dreaming, which is exploited by publicity; or the individual becomes politically active and tries to overthrow capitalism.

Berger sees publicity as a substitute for democracy. Instead of making significant political choices, the individual asserts their individuality by choosing what to buy. This compensates for, and hides the lack of democracy in society. Publicity is a kind of philosophical system, as it explains things in its own terms.

### **Publicity and the world**

The whole world is a setting for publicity, and it is a world beyond conflict, able even to translate revolution into its own terms. Yet there is a harsh contrast between the real world and publicity's world. At times, this becomes very obvious and Berger cites the example of a magazine using harsh images of third world poverty alongside publicity images. This raises a number of issues, among them the cynicism of the culture that shows these images alongside one another. Berger does not wish to emphasise the moral shock. He points out that even advertisers recognise it and tone their images down as a result.

Berger argues that the contrast between the news or feature photographs and the publicity images would be just as great if the former were about a happy event. What provides the contrast is that 'Publicity is essentially *eventless*... situated in a future continually deferred.' (p. 153). It replaces events with tangibility, and everything it shows is waiting to be acquired. This power to acquire is all that publicity recognises. In capitalism, all hopes are mixed together and simplified. The spectator-purchaser is offered vague but magical promises that these hopes will be met through purchases.

Without publicity, capitalism would not survive, and it can only survive by forcing the majority of people, '... whom it exploits, to define their own interests as

narrowly as possible... by imposing a false standard of what is and is not desirable ...' (p. 154).

## ASSIGNMENTS/DISCUSSION POINTS

### **The impact of photography**

1. Berger argues that it is not the quality of a painting or its meaning that determines its value but its uniqueness. In photography, unlike painting, it is possible to make many absolutely identical copies. Many would argue that this is one of the essential characteristics of photography and one that makes it a democratic medium. However, collectors of photography will always pay more for a 'vintage' print (one made when the photograph was taken) than for an identical one printed later. This higher price is justified by claiming that the vintage print will better reflect the photographer's original vision. Many photographers print limited editions of their work, and by ensuring a degree of rarity increase the value of the prints. Others, Edward Weston and Mario Giacomelli, for example, were happy to re-print images at later dates. Weston's son Brett, however, destroyed all his own negatives to prevent any posthumous printing of his own work. Sherrie Levine (see Chapter 9) photographs reproductions of famous photographers' work and claims the resulting prints as her own work. For Berger, the commercialisation of paintings because of their uniqueness clearly corrupts their meaning. Explore the notion of uniqueness, value and meaning in photography with regard to the points raised above.
2. Find a photograph you feel has a clear meaning, study it with a view to selecting parts of it which, when seen in isolation, or in conjunction with other parts would result in a different meaning. Make a good photocopy or scan of the original, cut it up and present the parts to illustrate the new meaning(s). Do this first without captions and then with captions. Evaluate the impact the captions have.

### **The Nude**

#### *The social presence of men and women*

1. Select three magazines, one aimed at women, one at men and one at a mixed audience. Analyse the advertising and editorial images in each to see if what Berger says about the social presence of men and women is still true today.

Is there any difference in the depiction of men and women in the different magazines, and within each magazine between the advertising and editorial depiction. See if you can find any similar magazines from earlier decades, and see if you think there have been any significant changes in the way men and women are depicted.

*The nude in oil painting*

1. It could be argued that in fine art, there has been an enormous change in the way the nude is depicted, exemplified by the work of such artists as Stanley Spencer, Lucian Freud and Jenny Saville. Likewise in photography, it could be argued that there is no longer a dominant convention with such photographers as Jo Spence, Sally Mann, Arno Minkkinen and John Coplans, exemplifying the changes in photography. The nude is increasingly being used in advertising. Can the criticisms Berger makes of the traditional nude in oil painting still be levelled against the nude in advertising? Look at a range of different magazines to substantiate your answer. You will also need to look at the section *The relationship between oil painting and publicity images* in the summary of Berger's book.
2. Clark and Berger have very different notions of the nude. For Clark, to be naked is simply to be without clothes, while a nude is created by art. For Berger, 'To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude.' (p. 54). Interestingly, the truthfulness of photography precluded it from being an art form for Clark. In modern terms, it could not 'objectify' the body for him, yet for Berger its realism makes it the ideal medium to objectify the body. In common English usage, the terms 'nude' and 'naked' seem quite interchangeable. Look at the nude, both past and present, in a range of media, or just in photography. When looking at the modern nude, look at the work of the painters Lucien Freud and Jenny Saville, and the photographers John Coplans, Sally Mann and Lee Friedlander for example. Do you think the distinctions Clark and Berger make are sustainable or helpful?
3. Berger uses a pictorial essay to make the point that photography has taken over from traditional oil in objectifying the nude. Collect copies of a range of images and make a pictorial essay of your own either to endorse or refute this point.

## Publicity

### *Envy, glamour and publicity*

1. Berger explains how advertising (publicity) works on its audience in a very negative way. Select a series of advertisements and use them to illustrate an argument that either supports Berger or undermines his case. When answering this question you will also need to consider the section headed *Functions of publicity* in the summary.

### *The relationship between oil painting and publicity images*

1. Berger lists a whole range of ways in which advertising uses aspects of oil painting. Find examples of as many aspects of these as you can, and where possible also show examples of the precedents in oil painting. Your response can be completely visual as in Chapters 2, 4 and 6 in *Ways of Seeing*. You can also look at Judith Williams' chapter 'The function of Art in Advertising' in her book *Consuming Passions*.

### *Functions of publicity*

1. To what extent do you agree with Berger that advertising undermines democracy through encouraging people to assert their individuality by consuming rather than by being politically active? When answering, consider the notion that if you are swayed by an advertisement you are not actually asserting your individuality but are doing what the advertiser wants you to do. Weigh this up against the advertiser's claim that they are just informing you of choices you could make.

### *Publicity and the world*

1. Berger comments on the incongruous juxtaposition of advertising images with hard hitting news photographs in magazines and seems not to have anticipated Oliviero Toscani's Benetton advertisements in which the hard hitting news photograph is the advertisement. Do the Benetton advertisements undermine Berger's claim that 'Publicity is essentially *eventless* . . . situated in a future continually deferred.' (p. 153), and that it replaces events with tangibility, and everything it shows is waiting to be acquired? Or can advertising appropriate any

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image and undermine its meaning? You can use other examples to substantiate your answer.

2. Since writing *Ways of Seeing* there have been significant changes in the magazine world. The Sunday newspaper magazine supplements, and the example Berger uses is one, have changed from being news orientated, to being lifestyle orientated. Don McCullin, the photographer whose work appears in Berger's example, was sacked by the *Sunday Times* for criticising this change in emphasis. This change strengthens publicity's way of seeing as there is now less likelihood of a clash of ways of seeing the world in such a magazine. If your country has newspapers with magazine supplements, evaluate them in terms of these potential clashes and the value of the magazines as purveyors (suppliers) of news.