

Ways of seeing

John Berger, Mike Dibb, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, and Richard Hollis

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There seems to be a general agreement on the fact that images and words are so thoroughly intertwined in the fabric of our lives that everyone should be prepared to make sense of them. At least since the last decades of the twentieth century, attempts have been made to explain how visual and linguistic meaning is produced in contemporary Western societies and how it can be interpreted by the viewer. Very interestingly, such efforts have appeared not only as scholarly research or theory but also as cultural products (publications, documentaries, podcasts) addressed to the general public. In 1972, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) produced a television series comprising four 30' programs in which they professedly wanted “to question some of the assumptions usually made about the tradition of European painting”, based on the idea that “the process of seeing paintings or seeing anything else is less spontaneous and natural than we tend to believe”. Another important angle they wanted to establish was that, by focusing not on the paintings themselves but on the way we see them now, from the vantage point of a technically advanced society, “we should also discover something about ourselves and the situation in which we are living”. One of the products of this project, which was called *Ways of Seeing* and was mentored by writer John Berger and producer Mike Dibb, was a highly illustrated (240 images in 165 pages) and very popular book, which is the object of this review.

Once *Ways of Seeing* is partially a response to another television series which represents a more traditionalist view of the Western artistic and cultural canon (namely, Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation*), it assumes a rather iconoclastic stance towards things. The first episode's opening scene, for example, shows John Berger cutting out Venus's head from what appears to be an original from Sandro Botticelli (*Venus and Mars*, c. 1483). The picture is

* First edition: London: BBC / Penguin Books, 1972; current edition: New York: Penguin Modern Classics, 2009. There is a Brazilian Portuguese translation by Lucia Olinto: Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1999.

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framed in dark wood and is hanging on a patterned wall among other classic-looking paintings; we hear the blade tearing the canvas and tend to feel horrified by what we interpret as brutal, senseless vandalism. Then we see the face of the Greek goddess (pinned from its context as a memento or a citation) join a pile of other similar images and come to understand that the desacralization and the massive reproduction of works of art is a trait of our times.



From the first episode of *Ways of Seeing*, a TV series produced by BBC.

The same straightforward approach is adopted throughout the book, which manages to deliver its message with no painstaking theoretical explanations and no attempts to hide away from controversy. There are very few quotations from other books and, when unavoidable, references appear on the left margin of the text, in small print. The quotations come mainly from art critics and cultural analysts who are mentioned only to be challenged or from some of the heavyweights of the Social and Human Sciences in the 60s and 70s: Pierre Bourdieu, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Walter Benjamin. The fact that, so far into the twenty-first century, these authors continue to be appreciated and remain influential only adds to the solidity of the book's argument. Regarding the images, on the other hand, all of the 155 works of art reproduced are listed at the end of the publication, along with basic information on the artists who created them and the collections where they belong.

As asserted by the authors on the 'Note to the reader', the structure of the book is as relevant for its purpose as the arguments contained within it. The intention of ascribing to the visual elements of the culture their proper value as conveyors of meaning is taken very

seriously here: from the seven independent texts that comprise the book, three are purely pictorial essays, and they “are intended to raise as many questions as the verbal” ones. In addition, the plurality of views stated on the title is many times reiterated, from the choice of a fragmented structure to an emphasis on the aspect of historical and cultural change which can be found in each one of the phenomena and situations under scrutiny.

Still regarding the book's structure, some critics have already noticed that the seven essays are not entirely autonomous; as a general rule, each pictorial essay should be paired with the following mixed one. This may be interpreted not as a weakness of the whole plot but as a result of our lack of fluency in reading visual texts. Therefore, in order to start building this new mode of literacy, we should face the pictorial texts and try to unravel them before reading the verbal essays about the same subject, which may not be easy.

The first essay tries to show how “the entire art of the past has now become a political issue”. To do so, it grounds some of its arguments on Walter Benjamin’s seminal text *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, conferring importance to the social (technological as well as economic and cultural) determinants of our vision and our relationship with the world of images. The text states that our vision is continually active and reciprocal; by the same token, every image embodies a way of seeing because its creation supposes a number of choices and gestures. According to the authors, reciprocity in this context means investing the viewer with great relevance in the interpretation and social use of the images, including the images of the past. The modern means of reproduction of artistic images have greatly enhanced their availability to all kinds of individuals and, therefore, have destroyed art's authority over people. Images are now “ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free”; for the first time, they surround us in the same way as language does. This new status provides us with the opportunity to use visual language differently and to confer power and control to the so far dispossessed classes. In the fabric of this text, images are used to show how mystification (the delivery of ideological messages through canonical interpretations of art) works; how reproducing, rearranging, enlarging, repositioning, or replacing pieces of an original work of art may be used to convey new meanings; and how the interaction between image and word can be powerful.

The tradition of the Nude in European painting provides the conversational topic for Essays 2 and 3: the visual representation of women in Western society. Celebrity photograph and advertisement help us understand how, in our society, power has been embedded in the relationship between seeing (a male prerogative) and being seen (which applies to women). In

Nude portraits, as well as in magazines and billboards around us, women are usually conceived as objects of vision, as sights, and this context affects the way we think of ourselves: men look at women; women watch themselves being looked at. By examining the tradition of the Nude in European art (and contemporary depictions of the feminine), the authors reveal that the real protagonist of such portraits is the male viewer, the (fully dressed) spectator to whom everything is staged and displayed and offered. Of course, there are exceptions, and a whole section of the 3rd essay is dedicated to the occasions when the artist's loving eye manages to suggest some ways out of the rigid frame that even today dictates the standards by which we measure ourselves as men and women.

Some other aspects of the oil painting as an art form will be dealt with in the next three essays. Starting from the traditional *Madonna with child*, a theme inherited from the Middle Ages, Essay 4 proposes to the reader a visual meditation on existentially relevant motifs, such as death and the dead, the various idealized forms of heterosexual love, and the development of a self-image for the male protagonist of Western Culture, from portrait to self-portrait to the assumption of the sitter's point of view in a composition by René Magritte. Essay 5 establishes a close relationship between oil painting and the gaze of the proprietor in a world where all things have become merchandise, between this art form and the eye of the conqueror of continents and populations around the globe. The critical stance assumed here has been dismissed by commentators as an example of Marxist ideology and indeed not only many of the statements are compatible with a leftist thinking, but the construction of all seven essays bears resemblance to dialectical materialist argumentation in its effort to unravel social reality through questioning what lies behind the appearances. Nevertheless, what has been pointed as a blemish may in fact be the foothold from which the authors build a consistent and impressive criticism of art in a capitalist society. Many of the arguments and the discussions proposed in the previous pages (including ethnicity; 'genre' pictures as opposed to mythological paintings; objects, animals, and people as property; and gender) are recaptured in the sixth essay, which brings clusters of images that pose questions and suggest intertextual links to the reader who, at this point of the journey, has acquired some fluency in reading images.

Finally, the seventh essay brings an argument the authors have deemed "prophetic" in subsequent interviews: in modern society, when publicity (i.e. advertising) has gained cultural importance, a whole spectrum of strategies and realms of human experience, including art and wit, are used to encourage the buying of commodities. Advertising images

are constantly produced to make us aware of what we are missing and to allure us with the promise of happiness. In order to do this, they frequently make direct reference to art, borrowing its cultural authority and its connotations of wealth and beauty. In addition to that, the composition and visual signs used in publicity and, as mentioned before, in oil painting, are very similar; after all, oil painting celebrated private property and was firmly based on its ability to produce a sense of tactile reality, an effect analogous to that of color photography. Here the reader is invited to apply his or her newfound skills to the reading of the advertising images that surround us.

Overall, it becomes more and more evident that the authors are willing to show that the way we perceive things is not spontaneous, but culturally and ideologically built. By doing so, they intend to trigger processes of questioning in the target-reader, that is to say, the common man in the street. They use a conversational tone to dismiss the elitism and academicism usually attached to the appreciation and the critical approach to works of art, virtually demolishing the bourgeois view of this realm. They incite the reader to assume an active and interrogative attitude towards messages (texts and images alike) and, in order to do so, they not only make a very sensible use of the limitations and conventions of the printed media but help redefine authorship by presenting a book which springs from the collaborative efforts of a collage artist, a graphic designer, a BBC producer, a writer and an art critic.

Ways of Seeing deserves to be read as a document of its time, as well as an original text that was able to inspire a generation eager to embark on the bold enterprises of Cultural, Mass Media, and Feminist Studies. In fact, its capital importance can be felt once again in our times, when multiliteracies have become a major issue. The present availability of visual information through the World Wide Web echoes the authors' words about how images came to surround us with their transience and disvalue; on the other hand, it has made it possible to build new tools that enhance the reading of this work. One good example is the compilation prepared by George Dillon and available through the University of Washington website (DILLON, 1998). It is worth mentioning again that the structure of the book (textual and visual essays interwoven) adds to the point it is trying to make: an image can convey meaning and instigate thought because it carries, in its very built, a comprehension of the world. In order to correspond to such richness, the reader must exert his own means of understanding when approaching an image. Hence the book's title: there is meaning and relevance in our *ways of seeing* things, works of art included.

REFERENCES

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