

## Ways of Seeing

*J. Berger*

May 22, 2009

Seeing is immediate, it becomes before words, yet seeing is a matter of choice. So far we agree with the author, who ostensibly has set up a general discourse on sight, yet eventually derailing into a reflection on the sociology (and politics) of sight. One thing that is striking of modern life is the profusion of images made possible by the technology of reproduction. What is the significance of an original in the ocean of its reproductions? One obvious answer is that the original is more authentic and less deteriorated preserving more information, assuming that each copying involves a loss of information. This is an obvious reaction, yet the issue goes deeper. What is the nature of authenticity when it comes to painting? Why is the hard copy of the painting the real thing when it is not in music or literature? In fact in the modern age there is no longer any need to make this distinction, which is but an artifact of old-fashioned technology. In the past a painting was the only way to make a visual statement, the spectator had to come to the painting as if to an icon or a shrine. There was no other way in which a painting could convey its message. True, already at the time of Rembrandt, there were copies of painting, engravings that could be reproduced into many copies and spread. In fact Rembrandt used this method of dissemination to advertise his own works, yet what was spread was but an indication of a painting, not the real thing in color and texture. But with the improved technology of reproduction, the copy nowadays conveys as much as the real painting, and instead of necessitating a pilgrimage, the painting travels by itself and solicits its own attention. Thus when a modern visitor to a museum stands before a classical painting, more likely than not it is not a first encounter but merely a reconfirmation that the painting exists. The real painting itself is like a standard, not unlike the meter in Paris, to be used as a source of comparison. Authenticity becomes the main component of an original painting, not its visual message. Authenticity is gauged by documentation, and it becomes the business not of the art lover as a lover of the visual, but the art lover in the sense of the fetishist. High prices paid by original works of art has nothing to do with their intrinsic worth, which cannot be translated into mere money, but appear as symbols of their worth as commodities, in short as objects of speculation. So far so good. Berger may not be very original, being strongly influenced by Walther Benjamin, as he admits, yet he conveys a good point.

Visual art for most people is the oil-painting. The oil-painting held pride of place for about five hundred years, from the end of the 15th century to the beginning of the 20th century. The point of the oil-painting is to establish ownership. Oil painting with its range of color and ability to convey texture, is in fact the next thing to the best, and in some instances, as with its ability to arrest time as with a portrait, the best thing period. Hundreds of thousands of oil-paintings were produced during those centuries, most of them having perished and most of them being of a rather indifferent quality. The very best of the paintings are so in virtue of being born in the prevalent tradition, yet managing to

pervert that very tradition and bend it to its own means. An oil-painting surrounded by a gilded frame is not like a window looking out into the world but rather like a safe installed in a wall. A painting depicts wealth, be it in the form of food or riches as exemplified by a still-life, sexual conquest as manifested by a nude, or natural beauty as depicted by a landscape. The highest form of painting was the mythological or religious one, genres that we modern tend to find rather tedious<sup>1</sup>, and although not directly indicative of wealth, they nevertheless served as reaffirmation of moral superiority. Exceptions were the so called genre paintings of everyday life, as well as land- and seascape paintings of the Old Dutch masters, to which should be added the intermittent transcending of the regular tradition, as in the later works of Rembrandt. But even among the supposedly innocuous paintings of everyday life, there were hidden assumptions and moral conclusions serving the ruling classes which commissioned the paintings. In short, the history of oil-painting is a history of suppression of the lower classes and glorification of the richer. A history that came to an end with the arrival of modern paintings such as Cubism. This is classical whig history in Marxist garb, and as such at first somewhat repulsive, then rather seductive, and finally somehow dissatisfying and simplistic.

Publicity images surround us and saturate our visual field with their subversive messages. They are born out of the tradition of oil-painting and borrows from it many traits and set images. Their purpose is that of seduction through specious promises. Promises of an improved future self liable to generate envy and the assertion that happiness ultimately lies in consumerism. Consumerism is the basis of the modern economy that feeds on growth itself, and from a Marxist point of view, modern economy is identical with Capitalism. Thus publicity images are but means of the rich to exploit and confuse the poor, of diverting them from collective political action to private pre-occupation. Thus there is an unbroken tradition linking the Capitalism of ownership, as represented by the oil-painting, to the modern promise of ownership. The oil-painting being a manifestation of accomplished wealth, the publicity image an invitation to future riches. It is all a sham, but if so, what is real life? Do the rich lead the real life, depriving the poor of the true path? This is a somewhat startling conclusion Berger invites the reader to form. Among the rich, he assures us, publicity plays no role, supposedly being superfluous. If so wherein is the charm of the charmed life?

Once again, although the authors injunction against consumer society is rather sound and bound to , its visual component are rather incidental if ubiquitous. Thus a potentially interesting study of seeing reduces to a diatribe against capitalist society, and as such runs the danger of becoming dated.

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<sup>1</sup> Clearly one should make a distinction between the religious paintings made for wealthy patrons, and those icons of the medieval centuries made for churches and worship by the devout.