Fifty Years of Seeing with John Berger (Metz, 20-21 Oct 22)

University of Lorraine, Metz, France, Oct 20–21, 2022
Deadline: Jun 20, 2022

Sarah Gould

Ways of Picturing, Thinking and Telling Our Time: Fifty Years of Seeing with John Berger

With a keynote lecture by Tom Overton.

2022 marks the 50th anniversary of two striking developments in John Berger's career. Indeed, 1972 was the year in which he was awarded the Booker Prize for G., and became a household name thanks to Ways of Seeing , an unprecedented programme through which the critical efforts of art history and historical materialism found their way to a wider audience. The anniversary provides an excellent opportunity for the Société d'Ėtudes AnglaisesContemporaines (SEAC) to devote its annual conference to the œuvre of this luminary of 20th - and 21th-century British culture: France was the country Berger chose for his home, and although his work has been staged, translated, and published there, it has not always received the academic attention it deserves. Accordingly, this conference will acknowledge Berger's significant impact on his contemporaries, both as a writer of fiction and non-fiction and as an art historian. Such an undertaking is, however, problematic: even as he rose to fame, Berger himself repeatedly warned against hagiographic approaches to great writers, and, more profoundly, argued against misapprehending art history as a linear sequence of individual protagonists, encouraging instead an understanding of culture as collective and collaborative. How then can we commemorate Berger's work without falling into the pit-falls he himself draws attention to? This reflexive paradox will be at the centre of the conference, which aims both to commemorate and to problematise Berger's complex legacy.

The very notion of an anniversary raises the issue of influence, and one of the objectives of the conference will be to examine the long shadow Berger casts on the landscapes of visual art and contemporary fiction. The impact of his thinking on visual art is widely documented, and reflected in events such as the symposium held in Lausanne in 2018, 'De B à X. Faire (l'histoire de) l'art depuis John Berger.' The deep impression he left on contemporary literature is also noteworthy, especially in the anglophone world. In A Jar of Wild Flowers, a collection published in celebration of his 90th birthday, Ali Smith states: 'I could say that everything I've ever written or aspired to write has been in one way or another an appreciation of the work of John Berger.' In the same volume, Amarjit Chandan describes Berger as 'the writer of our time,' suggesting that his figure towers over any attempt at apprehending contemporary writing and culture.

And yet, as Tom Overton points out in Landscapes, thinking in terms of 'influence' contradicts Berger's own understanding of authorship: 'Rather than the collective, collaborative act of story-

telling, the idea of “influence” seems more associated with [...] a capitalist logic of debt and restitution that Berger rejects.’ If the present conference is to propose a tribute to his work, it is bound to do so by fully engaging with the challenges his thinking and practice pose to any form of authoritarian imposition and to disciplining processes. Indeed, suspiciousness towards deference and canonisation is characteristic of his work.

One way of doing justice to Berger’s celebration of his readers’ ever-critical minds and eyes would be to respond to his entreaty in Ways of Seeing: ‘I hope you will consider what I arrange, but please, be sceptical of it.’ Ever mindful of the distinction between monography and hagiography, this conference will make room for critical appraisals of the contribution his work has made to our visual perception and imagination. It will take into account the ways in which Berger himself noted and anticipated such critical readings, stating as early as 1959 ‘I have been writing art criticism long enough to be proven wrong’ (in Portraits), and often connecting this sensitivity to his readers’ critical perspectives with his personal practice of ‘reconsidering’ (Overton, Portraits) artists and their works, returning to them from a different angle. Taking our cue from Berger’s awareness that the critic cannot content himself with situating the piece he studies, but must also reflexively ‘place [himself] historically’ (‘Between Two Colmars’), we will recognise a readiness to being read, critiqued and situated by others, as was the case for instance when Christopher Wood’s A History of Art History placed Berger beside Gombrich in the category of ‘fallen’ art historians.

The double movement that consists in inviting an other’s critical gaze while acknowledging one’s own situatedness points beyond a simple precaution against solipsism to a fundamental understanding of the collaborative nature of writing. One of the challenges of the conference in that sense will be to do justice to Berger’s own resistance to the ‘individualist illusion’ that would have us read art history as ‘a relay race of geniuses,’ (in Portraits) in a context where the monograph remained ‘one of the most typical discursive forms of art historical research and writing’ (Pollock). The aim will be to combine the attention to singularity proper to monographic research with Berger’s constant concern for the ramifications that inscribe each life in world historical processes. In doing so we will be fulfilling a condition necessary to the elaboration of any contemporary portrait, for ‘[i]n a world of transition and revolution, individuality has become a problem of historical and social relations [...] Every mode of individuality now relates to the whole world’ (‘No more portraits,’ in Landscapes). The consideration shown to the reader as a singular feeling and thinking agent is therefore underpinned by the wider attention to be paid to the collective – that same attention which led Berger to share his 1972 Prize between his ‘project about the migrant workers of Europe’ and the activism of the Black Panthers, thereby counteracting the logic of exploitation behind the wealth of Booker McConnell.

Finally, by keeping in mind the material framework within which he could work, Berger reached beyond academic networks of specialists and art historians, and beyond the communities of political activists he kept ever present in his mind and writings, to a wider audience who might encounter him through such popular media as TV or paperbacks. Following the same logic that made him choose cheap, black and white illustrations over the glossy ones frequently used in exhibition catalogues and academic books, the conference will aim to look for the marks Berger left in our ways of seeing especially where these imply unexpected yet welcome encounters, the sort of coincidences and serendipities unchecked by academic structures and boundaries. In keeping with

the author's appeal to an audience of non- specialists in Ways of Seeing, the conference will welcome contributions from 'common readers' as well as from Berger scholars.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:
-art and politics, scholarly writing and activism
- the individual and/within history
- reproductions and reproduction rights
- contemporary times and history
-Berger and border-crossings
-Berger and the common
-the monograph, the œuvre
-Berger and art historians
-Berger and academia
-Berger and discipline(s)
-word and image
-intertextual connections: Berger and/in contemporary fiction -Berger's readers as authors? Writing with/after Berger -storytelling and ideas, concepts and/in narrative
-storytelling and/as looking -writing and/as letter-writing

This conference will be jointly convened by Dr Sarah Gould (Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne; HiCSA research center) and Dr Diane Leblond (University of Lorraine in Metz, IDEA – Interdisciplinarité dans les Etudes Anglophones). It will be held at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities on the University of Lorraine's campus in Metz, on October 20th -21st, 2022.
We invite contributions from scholars, artists, writers, translators, publishers, or anyone who might testify to the impact of John Berger's work and ways of seeing.
Proposals of 300 words, together with a short biographical note, should be sent to Sarah Gould (sarah.gould@univ-paris1.fr) and Diane Leblond (diane.leblond@univ-lorraine.fr) by June 20th, 2022. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by June 30th, 2022.

A selection of peer-reviewed papers will be published in the SEAC's journal Etudes britanniques contemporaines: https://journals.openedition.org/ebc/

REFERENCES:
BERGER, John, Ways of Seeing. 1972, Penguin Books, 2008.
—'Speech on accepting the Booker Prize for Fiction at the Café Royal in London,' Nov. 23rd 1972, in Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible, Penguin Books, 2020. —'Between Two Colmars,' in About Looking. 1980, Bloomsbury, 2009.
—, ed. Geoff Dyer. Selected Essays of John Berger. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014. —, ed. Tom Overton. Portraits: John Berger on Artists. Verso Books, 2015.
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CHANDAN, Amarjit, Sally Potter, and Jean Mohr, eds. A Jar of Wild Flowers: essays in celebration of John Berger. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.
GUINS, Raiford, Juliette Kristensen, and Susan Pui San Lok, eds. 'Ways of seeing: 40th anniversary issue.' Journal of Visual Culture 11, no. 2 (2012).
POLLOCK, Griselda, 'Artists, Mythologies and Media — Genius, Madness and Art History', Screen 21, iss. 3 (Autumn 1980).

WOOD, Christopher, A History of Art History. Princeton University Press, 2019.

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