John Berger: The Transformational Pulse Beats of Art

Following a number of recent books by and on John Berger, coinciding with the renowned critic's passing away in 2017, Norman Saadi Nikro dives into some of Berger's writings and drawings. He explores the transformational impulses driving Berger's relational, molecular, and constellation-like approach, and its relevance to today's world in crisis.

Essay / Saadi Nikro August 22, 2020

A line, an area of tone, is important not really because it records what you have seen, but because of what it will lead you on to see.

John Berger, "The Basis of all Painting is Sculpture and Drawing."1

The recent flurry of books by and on John Berger coincides with his passing away in January 2017. These include the excellent intellectual biography by Joshua Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time: The Life and Work of John Berger*,2 and the equally excellent, though very different collection of short essays by various writers, activists, artists and cultural workers, *A Jar of Wild Flowers: Essays in Celebration of John Berger*.3 From Berger's own prolific pen are two collections of his essays on art, both edited and introduced by Tom Overton—*Landscapes: John Berger on Art,* and *Portraits: John Berger on Artists*.4 These are complimented by his fascinating, somewhat eccentric book inspired by Spinoza, *Bento's Sketchbook*,5 and the collection of late essays titled *Confabulations*,6 both of which address his own practice of drawing.

John_Berger-2009_(1).jpg



[1]

John Berger, a conversation at the library of Strasbourg, 2009 **[2]**
Image by Ji-Elle [3], CC BY-SA 3.0 [4]

Together, these volumes are a testament to Berger's abiding influence and enduring legacy on critical studies of visual art, cultural production, and political culture. Although *A Jar of Wild Flower* [5]s *[5]* is subtitled as a "celebration," the thirty-six contributions hardly set him up as some sort of hagiographic figure. Rather, just about every essay situates Berger's influence in a particular context, in relation to the respective contributor's own preoccupations, demonstrating how formal properties of art and cultural production imply interwoven threads of political sensibility, social history, and related circulations of material and imaginary resources. These interwoven threads accrue transformational capacities to bring about change and renewal. As the cultural studies scholar Nikos Papastergiadis points out in his contribution to the volume: "Formal innovations are important for Berger but they are never seen in a vacuum. They always come hand in hand with aspirations for social transformation." (72-73)7

Resonating with the interwoven capacities I mentioned above, transformational aspirations include an inexhaustible sense of "wonder" and "fascination" (Papastergiadis) that informed not merely Berger's thought, but the practical application of his thought—his actual practice of writing, or else

his drawing. There is always an unassuming freshness about Berger’s work, his essays exercising something like a departure into the potential significance of an emerging thought, through the resonating echo of an unanticipated turn of phrase, or else the potential of a stroke or smudge of his pencil to measure up to the image guiding his efforts, the image he is on his way to discovering.

514x840.jpg **[6]**

Confabulations

John Berger



[7]Cover

of John Berger's book Confabulations, Penguin, 2016

Formal properties of visual culture are for Berger never a formality. In fact much of his art criticism was devoted to demonstrating how aesthetic appreciation tended to idealise, and hence render static, works of art. For Berger, idealised conventions of art appreciation underestimate how the very modalities by which a painting is publicly displayed and viewed contribute to its capacity to be meaningful. Through this blindness, conventions tend, therefore, to hollow out recognition of a painting's transformational impulses. In an important, quite practical respect, Berger regarded *form* (the formal—material and ideal—properties of a painting, for example, or else genre and style in literature or film) itself as *trans-form*ational. Not merely anchored in a context, but energising contexts (such as institutional sites devoted to the display and studied appreciation of painting) as entwinements of social and cultural histories.

This transformational impulse informs Berger's mid-twentieth-century novel *A Painter of Our Time* [8].8 Its central character, the Hungarian painter Janos Lavin, records in his diary: "Every great drawing—even if it is of a hand or the back of a torso, forms perceived thousands of times before—is like a map of a newly discovered island" (53). Profoundly concerned with the potential of his work to engage (un)equally potential relationships between social transformation and art, for Lavin there is no formula by which connections between art and political culture can be defined. Thus it would be wrong to regard a painting as an expression of ideas, or else a representation of the world. To paint is to take up again—ever again—a learning of how to paint. As Lavin struggles to realise in the very practice of his painting, no formula will ever provide him with a meaning to his labours: "The process of learning," he writes in his diary, "is the process of constantly beginning again." (48)

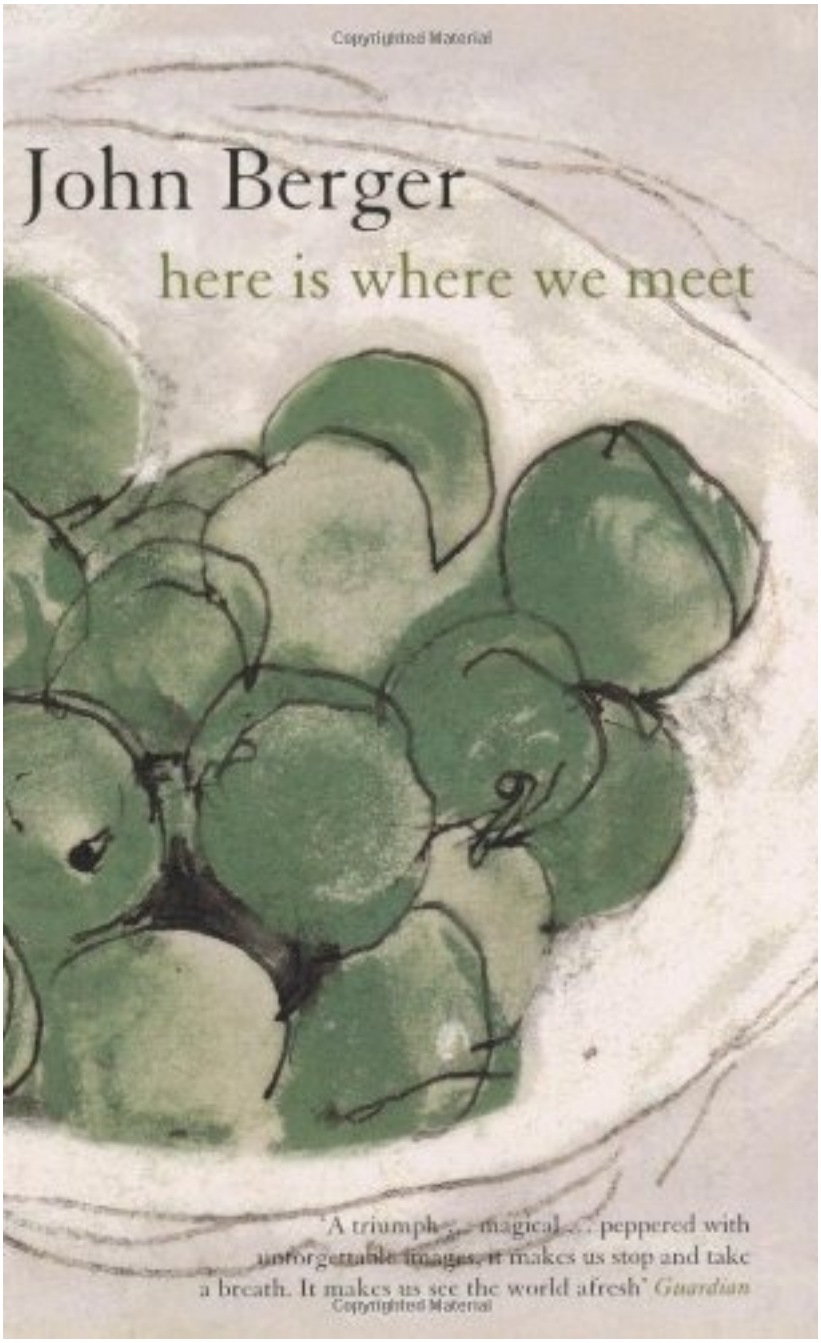
John Berger and Michael Silverblatt - part 1 **[9]**

Video of John Berger and Michael Silverblatt - part 1

Much the same can be said about Berger's late work, which maintains the unsettling inquisitiveness informing his youthful preoccupations. Never one to stake an intellectual claim on continuity and order, in his writing Berger always seems to be lurching across conventions of form (art criticism, poetry, novels, film scripts), leaving in his wake smouldering remains of intergeneric flash points. He could well have been included in Edward Said's posthumously published book on "late style," whereby "lateness" transpires "not as harmony and resolution, but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction."9

The transformational impulses of Berger's work encompass the wonder and curiosity he finds not merely in the world around him, nor in the formal properties of a work of art, but in the very mediums in and through which works of cultural production come to shape and orient their surroundings, the place of their creation and exposure. Against one convention or another, in his creative and critical writing Berger transformed such conventions into intimations of unfamiliarity, chiefly by foregrounding processes by which art resonates as a historical *modality* (not form) of cultural production.10

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[11]Cover of John Berger's book This is Where We Meet, Bloomsbury, 2005

Just as his coloured wash often overflows the outlines of his drawings, for Berger generic conventions and their corresponding material forms are never neat packages that can be excised from the pulse beats of their embodied circumstances, their making, and their subsequent livelihood. At the same time, context and circumstance can never exhaust the eventuating significance and potential resonance generic applications may come to embody. Rather, a painting's frame, or else the outline of a figure, constitute thresholds traversed by interwoven threads of form and context, figure and circumstance. Berger's relational, somewhat molecular approach to cultural production prefigured the emergence of installation, whereby the work of art takes place as an onsite adaptation of material and imaginary resources to shape its contours, its surroundings, its eventual taking place.

Another example of Berger's critical stance towards generic conventions is his 1972 Booker prize winning novel *G* [12].11 Throughout the novel, he explores how knowledge of the world, of things and others, involves a possessive sensibility that entails a flattening-out of the other to an ideal, restricted to a formal outline, contained by form itself. For example, striving to romantically capture Camille, the eponymous character reflects:

> …she had to become an ideal. She collaborated with you in the choice of qualities to be idealised. You chose Camille's innocence, delicacy, maternal feeling, spirituality. She emphasised these for you. She suppressed the aspects of herself which contradicted them. She became your myth. The only myth which was entirely your own. (179)

While in *G* Berger explores conventions of literature and cultural production (in a similar fashion to his famous book and BBC television series, *Ways of Seeing* [13], of the same year, 1972), the novel includes a meta-reflective commentary on the transformational potential of his own practice of writing. "Whatever I perceive or imagine," he writes, "amazes me by its particularity." What impresses Berger, we can say, is the way in which a particularity resists being defined according to the whole of which it is a part, resists being a mere part of a generic standard. Hence, as he points out, the formal qualities of a tree—"leaves, branches, or a trunk"—or else of a person—"limbs, eyes, hair"—are for him largely "superficial." Rather: "I am deeply struck by the uniqueness of each event. From this arises my difficulty as a writer—perhaps the magnificent impossibility of my being a writer. How am I to convey such uniqueness?" (136)

John Berger / Ways of Seeing , Episode 1 (1972) **[14]**

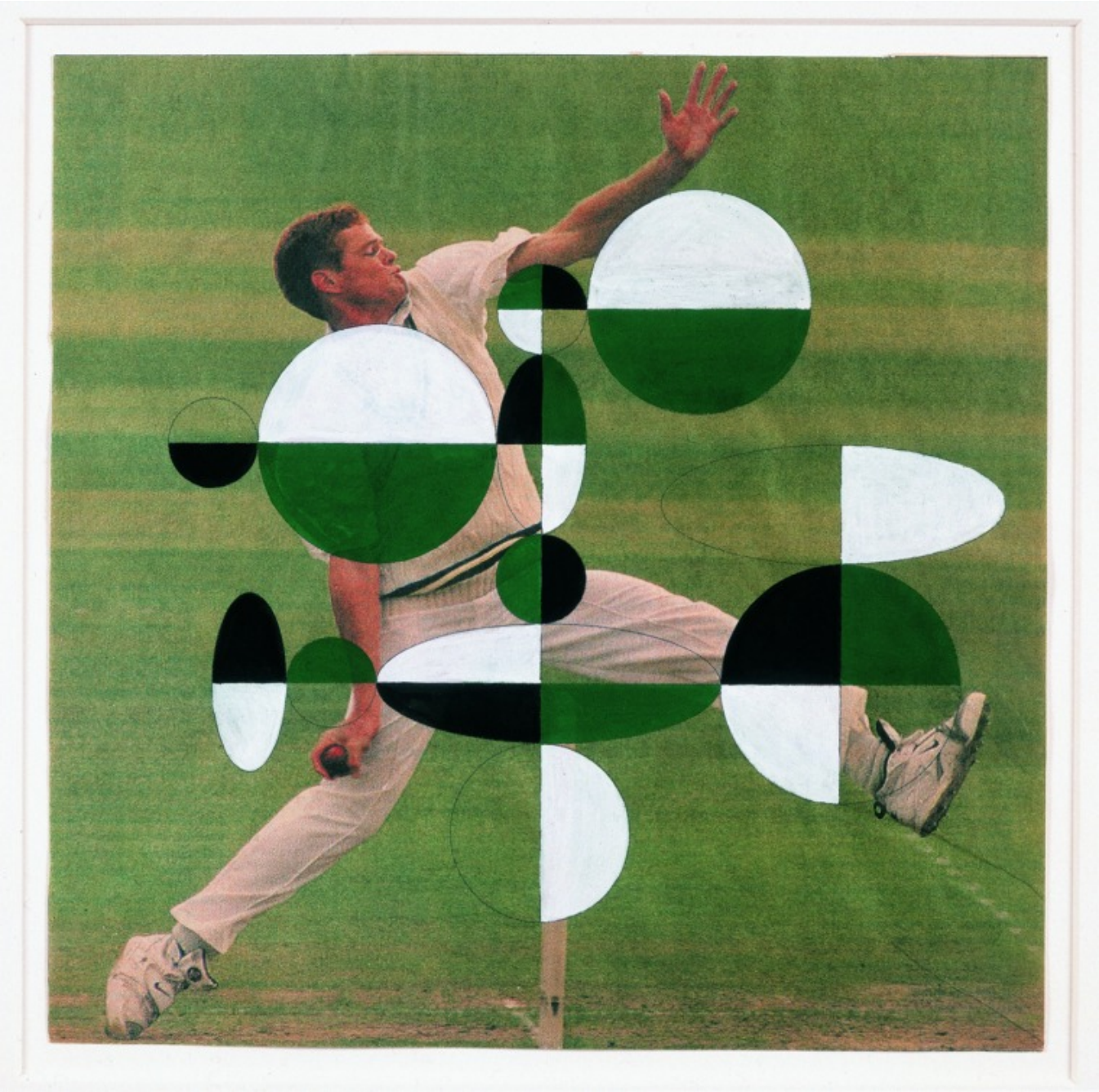
Video of John Berger / Ways of Seeing , Episode 1 (1972)
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His comments amount to a sensitivity not to things or people in themselves, but to the "*relations* which I perceive between things" (137, my emphasis). His sensitivity transpires as a shift from packaging events as causally connected instances of temporal succession ("consequentiality in time"), to intersections of place ("extensively in space"). The "complex synchronic pattern" (137) he prefers is captured by the famous, much quoted line of the novel: "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one." (133)12

For Berger, the one implicates a multiple, a number of parts whose relational resonance does not amount to a seamless whole, answerable to a governing figure. "But I am not the sum of my parts," Camille says (202), in her efforts to imagine her sense of self otherwise, not answerable to a romantic logic of possession.

In this relational, molecular scheme, the self or object is entwined with varying modalities of exchange and their tangential relationships. Berger's ploy of transforming an image of an apparent seamless whole into component parts serves to bring about a collage-like, or perhaps montage-like effect, foregrounding action, movement, process, the molecular circulations and interactions of an environment. Influenced by the Cubists' relational emphasis on combinations, discontinuity, discomposure and process, Berger took to task what he referred to as "the habit of looking at every object or body as though it were complete in itself, its completeness making it separate."13

9305Orozco.jpg **[15]**



[16]Gabriel Orozco, Atomist: Making Strides, 1996
Gouache and ink on newspaper clipping, 8 1/4 x 8 1/4 in. (20.9 x 20.9 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

Berger's approach also prefigures contemporary discussions of art practices in terms of resonance, gesture, and perception, such as Jill Bennett's discussion of the digital artwork of Gabriel Orozco, in particular his *Atomists* [17]series of 1996.14 Concentrating on sports photographs, Orozco's choice of subject matter is interesting in itself, considering how sports photography embodies the dilemma of trying to capture movement by denying movement.

By overlaying geometric shapes on different parts of a photograph of a sporting figure in action, Orozco draws attention to the coordinated flexibility of parts of the body, and hence challenges the

subordination of the part by the whole. He calls this “overlapping two images of movement,” and continues: “In [sic] one hand, the photograph of figures in movement, and on the other hand, a geometric shape that has movement. The geometric intervention on top of the photograph makes the movement of the bodies in the photograph more relevant, to be perceive [sic] in a different way. So I am cancelling, and revealing that movement.”15

Like the name *Atomist* suggests, Orozco is interested in foregrounding the movements of parts in their interrelations, rather than the whole—highlighting the flexing knees and elbows of the cricketer, and not the cricketer himself. This fascinating ploy of transforming an image of an apparent seamless whole into component parts serves to bring about a collage-like or montage-like effect, foregrounding action, movement, process, the molecular circulations and interactions of an environment. For Bennett, such transformational momentums amount to an “aesthetics of movement and concatenation”.16 She draws attention to works of cultural production as scenes of incessant configuration of parts in and through modalities of production, circulation, exposure, and adaptation. Similarly, for Berger, a line in a drawing doesn’t provide a mere outline, or else a connecting vector. A line rather brings about a molecular shift, thus foregrounding the incompleteness and insubstantiality of the whole.

This molecular shift involves an accompanying transformation of a surface into an environment. As he demonstrates in an important essay on his own practice of drawing, to draw a line amounts to a configuration of the surface into a three-dimensional site of contrast and movement, “possible to move through, but not see through” (29).17 Each line, smudge, or blot brings in its wake further configurations, through “relationships of planes, of receding and advancing surfaces” (30). Consequently, Berger describes a line as moving “*through*” (his italics) the space of his drawing, not on the surface of the paper: “not like the driver of a car, on one plane, but like a pilot in the air, movement in all three dimensions being possible.” (29)

John Berger About Time **[18]**

Video of John Berger About Time

Berger was greatly influenced by the work of Walter Benjamin, especially his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1999), which he references in *Ways of Seeing* (in both the television series and in the first chapter of the subsequent book). The key point here is Benjamin’s notion that the development of technical applications (especially photography) of copying a work of art not only introduces the very notion of an “original,” but brings about myriad ways of distributing, contextualising, and valuing what amounts to a proliferation of its significance. In the wake of this proliferation, the sense and value of an “original” become problematic and the notion of “authenticity” becomes compromised. To quote Benjamin’s famous words: “the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.”18 Like Benjamin, Berger never dismissed a reproduction as inauthentic, but emphasized how techniques of reproduction bring about a multiplicity of meanings, having the effect of historicizing a work of art, demystifying its “spiritual value.”19

Another aspect of Benjamin’s influence concerns the transformational impulses of what he referred to as “constellations,” outlined in his book on seventeenth-century German tragic drama—*Trauerspiel*, or mourning plays, first published in 1928.20 In his introduction, what he refers to as “fragments of thought” (29) entail a “foregoing of any view of the whole” (56). To illustrate this he draws an analogy to a mosaic. Made up of fragments or else particles, a mosaic foregrounds the

process by which it comports an image. Mosaics are usually made from small pieces of stone, glass, or tile, although they can be also made with other materials (leaves, acorns, paper cutouts, etc.). They are constituted through patterns, marked through contrasting colours, shapes, and textures.

A compelling aspect of mosaics is that there is no effort to hide the cracks and fissures by which the pieces are placed in proximity. In mosaics, therefore, both the image and the pieces are visible—the latter are not dissolved by the former. Fragments and the processes by which they are brought together exercise what Benjamin calls a "momentum"—the "irregular rhythm" by which fragments of a mosaic, or of thought, traverse the form of their contours. "The value of fragments of thought," Benjamin writes, "is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea" (29).

In one of his most Benjaminian essays, "Uses of Photography,"21 Berger develops a phenomenology of visual practices, suggesting that the "technical" application of photography, "its usage and 'reading,'" have become "habitual, an unexamined part of modern perception itself" (53). However, he makes a distinction between what he calls "private" and "public" uses of photography, arguing that where the "private photograph" maintains a continuity with the context in which it was produced (for example, in a family photo album), the "public photograph" (for example, a photograph that has been shorn from the context of its making) carries a depersonalising momentum by which it is "severed from all lived experience." (55-56)

However, rather than think of the public photograph as loss, Berger in fact is interested in its potential possibilities to save memory from oblivion, precisely by breathing new life into the redeemed image. Hence, the image realises its transformative capacity by "reacquiring a living context." Ever inchoate, the photographic image is redeemed as it "becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history." (61)

I digress very briefly to provide an example of this transformative potential that Berger articulates in terms of the capacity of a photographic image, as well as the photograph itself, to provoke social history into the becoming of an event. In an essay on colonial photography in Australia, the anthropologist John Bradley and his co-writers trace the itinerary of a group of photographs originally made toward the end of the nineteenth-century. The photographs were taken by earlier anthropologists keen to record the indigenous Yanyuwa people in Australia,22 people they regarded through a racist, evolutionary scheme as somehow doomed to extinction. Some of the photographs lay for years in the Melbourne Museum, as exhibits of Aboriginal Australians.

Bradley and his colleagues helped to rescue the photographs from the airless confines of their glass cabinets, and passed them on to the few remaining descendents of the Yanyuwa people. While the photographs bore witness to the people's ancestors, they played a role in the capacity of the descendents to maintain images and narratives of their ancestors, their history, and indeed a sense of themselves as a community. Interestingly, from first being instances of what the earlier anthropologists regarded as a dying race of people, the photographs came to bear witness to this racist assumption itself; and further, as vehicles by which people rehabilitate capacities to narrate their history.

The photographs, to refer back to Berger, "continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments".23 As I alluded to above, his notion of the "public photograph" is reminiscent of Benjamin's notion of the redeemed image. Although the photograph has been constrained to bring about a temporal arrest, a separation from narrative continuity, it becomes available for an event by which temporality, the passage of time, becomes significant for transformative capacities emerging at the fault lines of social history, political culture, art and cultural production.

John Berger: Understanding a Photograph **[19]**

Video of John Berger: Understanding a Photograph

A key aspect of Berger's constellation-like approach was his trust in *hope*. While art and cultural production are never ciphers of one ideological argument or another, they involve processes in which social and cultural transformations are just as potential (surprisingly and digressively) as they are actual. And this potentiality implicates circulations of material and imaginary resources that transpire as embodied capacities to adapt and work on such resources. In the contemporary midst of environmental devastation, now complemented by a related and equally global plague, the transformational impulses of Berger's work reminds us that, like any other resource, hope is differentially packaged and parcelled out, though it remains supple enough for our interventions.

- 1. "The Basis of all Painting is Sculpture and Drawing." Republished in Tom Overton (ed), *Landscapes: John Berger on Art*. London: Verso, 2018
- 2. Joshua Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time: The Life and Work of John Berger*. London: Verso, 2018
- 3. Yasmin Gunaratnam, Amarjit Chandan, (eds) *A Jar of Wild Flowers: Essays in Celebration of John Berger*. London: Zed Books, 2016
- 4. Tom Overton (ed), *Landscapes: John Berger on Art*. London: Verso, 2018; and Portraits: John Berger on Artists. London: Verso, 2017
- 5. John Berger, *Bento's Sketchbook*. London: Verso, 2015
- 6. John Berger, *Confabulations*. London: Penguin, 2016
- 7. "The Colour of the Cosmos: John Berger on Art and the Mystery of Creativity." In Gunaratnam & Chandan (see footnote 2)
- 8. John Berger, *A Painter of Our Time*. London: Verso, 2010
- 9. Edward W. Said. *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*. London: Vintage, 2007, p. 7.
- 10. By *modality* I mean that a work of art encompasses a number of practical and productive applications, a range of material and imaginative resources, as well as the social relations and studied appreciation by which works of cultural production are valued. These include the instruments and substances artists use in their work (instruments and substances that have their own social histories of production and exchange), such as paints and brushes, digital applications, textiles, lenses and film; space and time, sound and light; promotion and distribution; places of exhibition and viewing; as well as reviews and commentaries.
- 11. John Berger, *G: A Novel*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012
- 12. In the novel, this declaration is not merely announced as an abstract idea, but is given flesh. An example of this are the many stories and varying versions of what happened to the character Chavez, as he attempted to be the first person to fly over the Alps. The more witnesses there were, it seems, the more there were accounts of what happened, circulating through rumour, gossip, as well as the press (153). Berger borrowed the character and events from life: Jorge Chávez, a Parisian of Peruvian descent, had flown over the Alps in 1910.
- 13. John Berger. "The Moment of Cubism." Republished in Tom Overton (ed), *Landscapes: John Berger on Art*. London: Verso, 2018, p. 132
- 14. Jill Bennett. *Practical Aesthetics: Events, Affects and Art after 9/11*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2012
- 15. Gabriel Orozco, Atomists. Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1996. https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/240/3097 [17] Accessed, April 7, 2020
- 16. Bennet, p. 158
- 17. See note 1, above.
- 18. Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zorn. London: Pimlico, 1999, p. 215
- 19. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. London: penguin, 2008, p. 21
- 20. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. London: Verso, 1992
- 21. John Berger, "Uses of Photography". In his *About Looking*. London: Bloomsbury, 2009
- 22. John Bradley, Philip Adgemis, and Lika Haralampou. "'Why Can't They Put Their Names?':

Colonial Photography, Repatriation and Social Memory." *History and Anthropology*, 25.1, 2014, 47-71

- 23. John Berger, "Uses of Photography," p. 61

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