Ways of Seeing: In Search of the Unique Thumbprint

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John Berger's documentary Ways of Seeing is not merely about ways of looking; it is about what we actually see, how we see, how we perceive, and what we see with. Across these four episodes, the tradition of European painting serves as a pretext to arrive at broader questions concerning image, meaning, experience, memory, and dreams.

In the first episode, Berger speaks of two crucial factors in seeing and perceiving: the mediums and stimuli around us, and our own experience of seeing. No reality enters our eyes and minds without passing through the filters that surround us; words, music, camera movements, and

visual tools can alter our perception of reality. On the other hand, seeing itself is a learned experience: what we see, what we overlook, and how we interpret what we behold. To illustrate this, Berger points to the invention of the camera. Ever since the camera came into existence, the human eye, which previously could only exist in one place at a time, was suddenly able to be everywhere. Works of art that were once unique, existing in only a single location in the world, could now be reproduced and seen globally. The image was no longer strictly bound to its physical location. The uniqueness of the work vanished, and reality was confronted with multiplicity. From this, one can conclude that reality is never seen and perceived with the purity we imagine. Reality itself is neither pure nor unmediated, the stimuli around us do not allow for such unfiltered perception, and our minds cannot see devoid of preconceptions and background contexts. Meaning is not fixed; it is recreated with every new glance. To demonstrate this, Berger returns to the tradition of European painting. If we truly want to understand the paintings of this tradition, we must understand the conventions, values, and power relations that governed them at the time of their creation. An awareness of these contexts allows us to control our subconscious and to look anew at what we once unquestioningly admired.

"Becoming aware of traditions, intentions, and ways of seeing empowers us against the blows of the powerful."

In the second episode, Berger turns to the image of the woman: the image she holds of herself and the expectations she places upon herself. He demonstrates that this image is not merely the creation of contemporary women, or even men, but rather a construct handed down to her across centuries. Here, a question forms in my mind: when the naked Adam and Eve see each other, and in the creation narrative, God speaks and reprimands Eve, where do these meanings and definitions come from? Was it truly the word of God, or did humanity forge its own meanings, imperatives, images, and expectations, attributing them to the world? We do not deny the existence of God, but whatever has been verbalized and constructed as meaning within the human sphere has undoubtedly passed through the conduit of humanity. Berger clarifies this with artistic examples: one artist views nudity as a form of clothing, another sees it as art, and yet another condemns it. When disparate definitions exist for the exact same thing, it becomes evident that meaning is neither primordial nor eternal; humans construct it, transmit it, and continuously return to it. Now that we recognize these images, concepts, and meanings as human constructs, we too, as humans, hold the power to see anew and construct meaning anew. Or perhaps, before forging fresh meaning, we might wish to gaze upon what stands before us, free from ready-made definitions.

In the third episode, Berger returns once more to the tradition of European painting. If we want to comprehend a reality or a totality, we must delve into its details. Totality can conceal truths that are only revealed upon closer inspection. When we examine the details of these canvases, we see that many are inextricably linked to rulers, the wealthy, property, and the objectification of women's beauty. Painting, in this context, is no longer merely a work of art; it functions as a medium to display and cement the status and wealth of a specific class. Through this lens, the meaning of a painting shifts entirely for me. I can still admire the painter’s skill, the oil technique, and the execution, but I can no longer view its content divorced from its purpose. Now I ask: What is being shown? How is it being shown? What remains hidden, and why? "Tradition can be reproduced within itself, in such a way that it contradicts itself."

Perhaps this is the very moment I can look at the same painting once more, not to validate my previous perception, but to see it truly anew. However, in the fourth episode, Berger delves into the most intimate, personal, and, as one tends to imagine, purest part of human existence: imagination and dreams. We believe our dreams are our own creations; private, inaccessible to others, and shielded from the interference of the outside world. But images are everywhere. Advertisements, visual experiences, mediums of transmission, and meanings we have previously encountered linger in our memory and find their way into our dreams. Berger shows that images can captivate us, even for a fleeting moment, and these very moments become an integral part of our memory and visual experience.

Therefore, even the dream we consider the most personal and untainted part of our being can be heavily influenced by what we have previously witnessed. He speaks of dreams that appear entirely personal on the surface, yet are unmistakably shaped by the external world. Here, another question arises: if images, meanings, definitions, and visual experiences infiltrate our dreams, then to what extent are our dreams genuinely our own creation? There is a saying: "Whatever can take shape in the dream of humanity will one day manifest in reality." If our dreams are shaped by what we have seen and absorbed, then what transpires in reality is perhaps not as independent of these constructs as we might presume. In the end, one thing becomes clear to me: our eyes and minds are, to some extent, borrowed. We look through eyes that have seen things long before us, and we forge meaning with a mind steeped in meanings defined long before us.

Are we, then, living in captivity?

Perhaps what draws us away from this captivity is the inherent struggle for freedom; the struggle to distance ourselves from what has been handed to us, to see again, to ask again, and perhaps,

to live more authentically. But after watching Ways of Seeing, the act of seeing was no longer just a matter of the eye for me. The core issue became finding something I imagined to be truly unique. I wanted to know: if everything is subject to reproduction, interpretation, and redefinition, what could possibly retain a trace of its absolute uniqueness?

Perhaps a hand.

The Unique Thumbprint

Ah, if only this music would fall silent.

I want to find the lines of your hand.

Which one is your hand?

The joints must be slightly bent.

Ah, yes,

you played the Tar.

Bent fingers,

I must search among the bent fingers!

If they would turn off these ridiculous spotlights,

perhaps...

After all, in the glare of the light, all fingers

bend with a black shadow.

Ah, I have lost you again.

A feminine hand!

A masculine hand!

What nonsense!

Good thing I didn’t send anyone to find your hand.

I have seen your hands

and I don't believe this rubbish.

I know your hand was rough,

rough and masculine.

So, among the hands of men

I search for yours.

Men...

No!

Rough hands!

For hours I have been staring,

wondering which could be yours.

What if your hand isn’t even in this frame?

The lines of the hands are all so alike,

only one finger has a mole.

Perhaps a trick of my eye,

perhaps it is a shadow,

or perhaps they placed it there just to be different.

Anyway, I wish your finger had a mole!

Why from this angle, anyway? Why only hands?

So we would realize our unique thumbprint

is the same as everyone else's in the photograph.

What does 'unique' even mean?

Who taught me this word?

Those who taught me, where did they learn it?

From the whispers of the unseen? From God?

Or from someone who, like us, had the power to speak and write?

Ah, I have peered so closely that my eyes

are filled with shadow and fog.

I need to blink a little,

but as soon as I close my eyes,

a soft music starts to play.

As if the hands are linking together,

with a collective voice,

circling the house of God.

But if a drum begins to beat,

I feel their pace quickens,

they want to wrap around my throat.

I have this nightmare at nights.

When I open my eyes,

I lose you again,

I am lost again...

Again, among the identical lines of human hands,

I search for your unique thumbprint.