multitudes
Special Issue

Art TV clash

Beyond Criticism
L'invention de la TV
Eine paradoxale Utopie
Last Regards

TV-Essay
Demystifying the Means of Reproduction in the Broadcast Medium

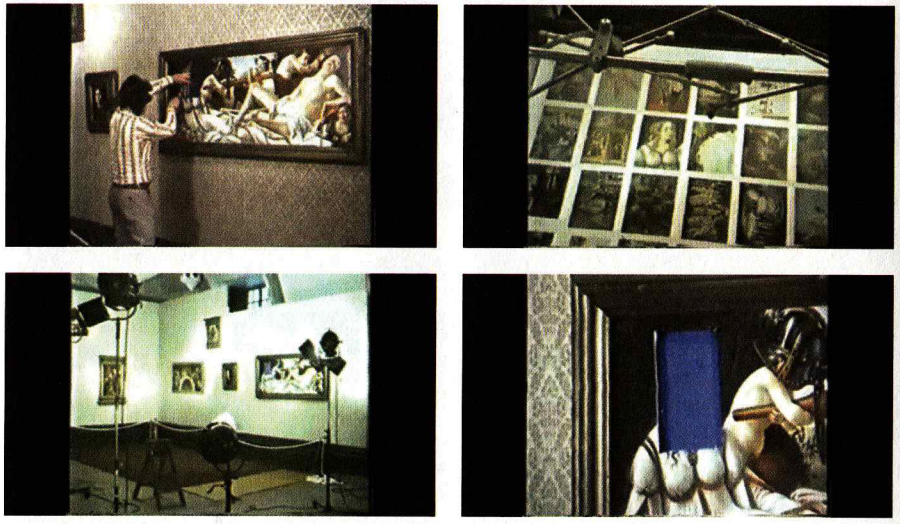
Paula Roush

In his BBC commissioned 1972 art series Ways of Seeing[1] John Berger has done a great deal to make us question the authority of the art expert and the institutionalization of art history through the medium of television. That fully prevent us from seeing the series as a conventional outline of western art history, akin to the previous Kenneth Clark's 1969 series Civilisation[2], the first BBC documentary on fine arts. Ways of Seeing is not about displaying classic art masterpieces for contemplation via the medium of television. It is about analysing their status as part of a visual language that becomes part of everyone's lives as they enter their living room. Some of the questions raised are: what does it mean when a Botticelli appears in your television screen? What are the continuities and ruptures with surrounding images when shown in a BBC art series? Or when that same aesthetics are explored in the language of advertising? For Berger there is a paradox at work that needs to be deconstructed: on one hand images of traditional painting invade our lives via several means of reproduction, from the printing press to film and television; on the other hand, the discourse built by the art experts to supplement these images mystifies our relationship to them by focusing in purely formal terms and obscuring what has been a history of class struggle. By doing this, they prevent us from connecting historical art to our everyday experiences within capitalistic modes of production. His belief is that "a lot more is possible but only if art is stripped of the false mystery and the false religiosity that surrounds it. This religiosity usually linked with cash value but always invoked in name of culture and civilization is in fact a substitute for what paintings lost when camera made them reproducible" (Berger, 1972).

To demystify the way art history is theorized in art books and TV series, Berger uses shock tactics not usually seen on television. In the first image in the series, the presenter—back towards the camera, and with the help of an x-acto knife—cuts a section of a framed Botticelli's Venus and Mars painting. The masterpiece is "vanda-

1 Ways of Seeing: *John Berger 1972 BBC Series*, art-tv play list, viewed 10 June 2010, www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=156CE8063CD60112 (Henceforth: Berger, 1972).

2 Civilsation: *Kenneth Clark's 1969 BBC Series*, episode 1, viewed 10 June 2010, www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ZZNrqUv3Hk



lised" in front of our eyes and even before we are told the title and the author of the painting, the camera pans into a printing press, placing us in the context of postcard reproduction, the only way we are likely to consume historical painting these days.

Berger's voice introducing the series is accompanied by the sound of ripping canvas whilst the camera zooms into the cropped Venus head:

"This is the first of four programmes in which I want to question some of the assumptions usually made about the tradition of European painting, that tradition that is born around 1400 and died about 1900 [as he finishes cropping Venus' head] Tonight it isn't so much the paintings themselves which I want to consider as the way we now see them [separates the fragment from the painting, and as he walks away from the scene, there is a change to Venus' head as a postcard, being reproduced with other postcards of traditional paintings in a printing press] Now in the second half of the 20th century because we see these paintings as nobody saw them before. If we discover why this is so we should also discover something about ourselves and the situation in which we are living."

On the surface, the subject appears to relate to art history—the series is divided into four parts—European painting, female nude, oil painting, advertising (from oil painting to photography), but in fact Berger follows the principles and methodologies of radical and critical art history, practices emerging since the early 1970s thanks to which art history "has become much more open, interrogative (questioning), and self-critical" (Harris).

Central to this is making visible the role of the narrator in "institutional reproductionî of knowledge, specifically in his case, questioning the role of a television art series as this one in reproducing the discipline of art history, "helping to supply what comes to stand as art-historical Authority and Truth" (ibid) and producing viewers equipped with fixed perspectives. At the end of the episode, Berger, faces the camera and states:

"but remember that I am controlling and using for my own purposes the means of reproduction needed for these programmes. The images may be like words but there is no dialogue yet. You cannot reply to me. For that to become possible in the modern media of communication, access to television must be extended beyond these present narrow limits. Meanwhile with this programme as with all programmes you receive images and meanings, which are arranged. I hope you will consider what I arranged but be skeptical of it." (Berger, 1972)

The theoretical and aesthetic directions taken by Berger are made clear in the final credits of the first episode where he acknowledges "Many of the ideas in this programme were first outlined in an essay written in 1936 by the German writer Walter Benjamin." Evidently, there are affinities between Berger's television series and Benjamin's text- The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction- namely its concern for the impact of the camera and the screen for the politics of images and the relationships between art and everyday life.

This appropriation and translation of Benjamin' literary work into a visual work is one of the aspects that allow us to compare Berger's series with other audio-visual practices, described as audio-visual essay in Nora Alter's recent reflections on the genre: "…many audio-visual essays produced in a number of national contexts and languages incorporate, either by direct citation or visual reference, the words, theories and methods of Adorno, Lukács and especially Benjamin." (2007)

But Berger's work is best understood as the result of a double act of translation, which consisted firstly in rethinking the text as an audio-visual product, and secondly, in translating Benjamin's reflection into the medium of broadcast television.

The first aspect is visible in the tribute to Dziga Vertov presenting us with extracts from the Russian film director's 1923 manifesto and images from the film he made in 1928 "The man with the movie camera", this way identifying Ways of Seeing essayistic roots with one of the first film essays in the history of cinema.

Following Benjamin whose aim was to "compare the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting" leads Berger on to show how the meaning of an image changes by the movements of the camera, the introduction of sound to create narratives that depend on the unfolding of time, by what come before or after it as when one zapps into a different channel.

"The invention of the camera has changed not only what we see but how we see it and in a crucial quite simple way it has even changed paintings painted long before it was invented. "The painting on the wall like the human eye can only be in one place at one time. The camera reproduces it making it available in any size anywhere for any purpose." When the painting is identified as Botticelli's Venus and Mars it is to show the set up and the cut up painting [view of the room, wider angle, as a TV studio setting, on the right wall the framed Botticelli, Venus head cropped].

"Botticelli's Venus and Mars used to be a unique image which is only possible to see in the room where it was actually hanging. Now its image or detail of itÖcan be seen in a million different places at the same time."

Whilst Benjamin speaks of reproduction with a focus on the camera, as in cinema and film, Berger extends the reflection into the materiality of the television channels:

"As you look at them now on your screen, your wall paper is around them your window is opposite them your carpet is below them at this same moment they are on many other screens surrounded by different objects, different colours, different sounds, you are seeing them in the context of your own life. They are surrounded not by guilded frames but by the familiarity of the room you are in and the people around you."

Important to understand retrospectively the essayistic mode of Ways of Seeing is not only its multi-layered editing, like other video-essays- combining fragments of image, sound tracks and voice over- but also its self-reflexive mode that in Berger's case consists in deconstructing the juxtapositions of sound, image and linear editing in order to expose the ideological effect that underlies the practice of the TV making. This appears specific to the context of broadcast television, amplifying the political commitment found in the audio-visual essay: "This model of translation, which galvanizes the observer into the role of a full-fledged participant in the construction of meaning, supplies the audio-visual essay with metaphors of relationality and participation in a medium that in its mass manifestations has been traditionally associated with passivity" (Nora, 2007)

In a sense the television series Ways of Seeing, could be said to reflect, embody, and exemplify editing and narrative modes being developed in the video essay, pointing towards a sub-genre I would like to call TV-essay. Starting with the title- making us aware of the plurality of gazes involved- our own, the presenter, the camera, the art expert- it posits for us the implications of these conflicting positions for the politics of seeing. We look at the series in a different way from other television art series, not by contemplating via television a selection of art works selected by the presenter, but by inferring the mechanisms of reproduction immanent in the medium of television itself, and its potential for self-reflexion.

Ways of Seeing was also published in the book format and the publication explores similar experimentalism in the space of the page. Playing with visual sequencing via photography rather than moving image, the challenge comes from alternating chapters that are text-based with others where the visual language is left to do all the work, similarly to the thesis of the television series where it was pointed out that images should be left to tell their story. This hybrid mode of mashing up critical theory and art work, "high art" and "popular culture" that appeared as groundbreaking in the early 1970s is now being pursued in the art academy as part of "practice-based" research but it is still far from becoming the canon. Whilst there is an increasing recognition for the need to develop a theory of the visual that challenges conventional text forms, these are still recognized as "emerging practices" that, as commented by Ian Christie (2008), "point towards the idea of an analysis not in conventional textual form but either in the medium of the original work itself or is some other non-verbal form. What they have in common, perhaps, is a belief that textual analysis is lacking in the capacity to deal with the visual…"

L'essai-TV comment démystifier les moyens de reproduction des images?

Paula Roush

Avec la série commissionnée par la BBC en 1972 et intitulée Ways of Seing, *John Berger a posé les bases d'un questionnement durable sur l'autorité de l'expert et sur l'institutionnalisation de l'histoire de l'art par le médium de la télévision*[1]. *Cette série ne porte pas tant sur l'analyse de chefs-d'œuvre à la télévision que sur le statut de ces chefs-d'œuvre dès lors qu'ils pénètrent chez nous par l'entremise de nos petits écrans. Que se passe-t-il lorsqu'un Botticelli apparaît sur notre écran télévisé, sur le fond de la tapisserie de notre salon? Quelles sont les continuités et les ruptures entre les images qui nous entourent lorsque nous regardons une telle série?*

Le paradoxe sur lequel réfléchit John Berger est le suivant: d'un côté, les images de tableaux célèbres envahissent nos espaces de vie grâce à la diffusion audio-visuelle; d'un autre côté, le discours construit par les experts pour supplémenter ces images mystifie la relation que nous entretenons avec elles, en se focalisant sur des termes purement formels et en occultant l'histoire des luttes de classes qui les sous-tend. Avec pour résultat que nous ne parvenons pas à connecter cet art issu du passé avec nos expériences actuelles dans le cadre des modes capitalistes de production. Avec sa série, John Berger voulait croire que « nous pouvons faire beaucoup mieux, à condition de dépouiller l'art de son faux mystère et de la fausse religiosité qui l'entoure. Cette religiosité, qui est étroitement liée à la valeur marchande, quoiqu'elle soit toujours invoquée au nom de la culture et de la civilisation, est en fait un substitut pour ce que les peintures ont perdu, dès lors que la caméra les a rendues reproductibles ».

Afin d'opérer cette démystification, John Berger recourt à des tactiques de choc rarement vues à la télévision. Dans les premières images de la série, le présentateur, dos à la caméra et armé d'un couteau, découpe une section du Venus et Mars *de Botticelli. Le chef d'œuvre est vandalisé devant nos yeux et, avant même que nous apprenions le titre et l'auteur du tableau, la caméra le fait apparaître sous la presse à imprimerie, nous déplaçant du musée vers la fabrique de cartes postales et des autres modes de reproduction technique qui diffusent aujourd'hui le tableau. La série ne porte pas tant sur les tableaux eux-mêmes que sur « la façon dont on les voit », insistant sur le fait qu'« aujourd'hui, nous voyons ces tableaux comme personne ne les a vus auparavant ».*

Parce qu'elles sont découpées, déplacées, réinsérées dans les contextes les plus divers, soumises à des montages et à des manipulations qui les réinvestissent de significations nouvelles, ces images doivent être pensées dans leur circulation, tout autant que par référence à leur contexte d'origine. C'est sur cette circulation rendue possible par leur reproduction mécanique que John Berger attire notre attention avec Ways of Seeing*: «*Venus et Mars *de Botticelli était autrefois une image unique qu'il était seulement possible de voir dans la salle où le tableau était suspendu. Aujourd'hui cette image ou certains de ses détails peuvent être vus à des millions d'endroits différents au même moment.» Les deux derniers épisodes de la série consistent à étudier les rapports étroits qui ont marqué la peinture à l'huile et l'affirmation du régime de propriété privée entre le XV^e^ et le XIX^e^ siècle, ainsi que les effets induits par la circulation d'images publicitaires dans la société de la seconde moitié du XX^e^ siècle.*

1 John Berger, Ways of Seeing, *1972 BBC Series (disponible par tranches sur youtube).*