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John Berger as Critic (Review Essay)

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Reviews and Discussion

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An Introduction to Two Essays on Berger's Work

In the past several decades, John Berger has produced a large body of art criticism, and numerous novels and TV and film scripts. Working within an English tradition of radicalism, with such antecedents as the 1930s journalism of Anthony Blunt[1] and the work of such Marxists as Frederick Antal and Max Raphael, his work remains important for some British critics.[2] Berger has never been well known in this country.[3] If his style of "engaged criticism" is now often emulated, his highly critical estimate of that painting, abstract expressionism — usually seen as a "triumph" of American culture — is entirely opposed to the now orthodox view of that art. Berger, we feel, is a critic worth serious attention. When most criticism, especially — ironically — "leftist criticism," increasingly adopts a Frenchified mandarin style, his films and writing offer an important alternative, a model of sophisticated work which is genuinely accessible to a popular audience. What other critic could describe the failure of the revolutions of 1968 in terms of an account of his two visits to the Gruenewald Altarpiece at Colmar, or use a single photograph ("A Red Hussar Leaving, June 1919, Budapest," by André Kertesz) to discuss the relation of photography to modern conceptions of time and history?[4]

Mark Roskill's article discusses how Berger's move from being a writer of criticism to producing TV scripts led Berger to challenge some of the accepted conventions of that medium. David Carrier's article discusses the theory of one part of the material presented in those programs, published in Berger's *Ways of Seeing:* "A Feminist Theory of Art History."[5]

Notes

1 See Anthony Blunt, "From Bloomsbury to Marxism," *Art Monthly* 32(1979-1980):12-17, and the articles on the history of his early criticism by Lynda Morris in issues 35 and 36 of the same journal.

2 Though Antal, like Arnold Hauser and Max Raphael, were, of course, figures in the German art history world forced to flee by Hitler, what concerns us here is how their style of criticism influenced Berger.

3 Peter Fuller's numerous articles recently published in *Art Monthly,* and his "Fine Art after Modernism," *New Left Review* 119 (1980):42-59, show Berger's continuing influence in England. Critical accounts of Berger interesting both for their own sake and in light of the subsequent careers of these writers are Michael Fried, "Marxism and Criticism," *Arts Magazine* 36, no. 4(1962):70-72; and Richard Wollheim, "The Sectarian Imagination," *Encounter* 6(1961):47-53. Nikos Stangos offers a spirited defense of Berger in his introduction to Berger's *Selected Essays and Articles* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Eng.: 1972), pp. 11-15. The "art-language" group has produced an unintentionally funny critique, *Art-Language* 4, no. 3 (1978):55-66, which, though very hard to follow, has some remarks on Berger on the nude. Finally, there is a recent useful popular account by Carrie Rickey, "John Berger Is a Big Deal," *The Village Voice* (1980):1.

4 John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), pp. 127-133; John Berger, "In Opposition to History, In Defiance of Time," *The Village Voice,* October 8-14(1980):88-89.

5 Though Mark Roskill is the author of the first article, and David Carrier the author of the second article and this Introduction, we have worked together on this enterprise, and each of us is indebted to the other for many suggestions about style and substance.

Berger: Film and Counterculture

In order to present John Berger as a countercultural critic, it will be necessary to set out, first of all, what is meant by the term "counterculture" and why it should apply here. It will then be used in reference to one phase only of Berger's career: the period of the early 1970s during which his TV series "Ways of Seeing" was shown on BBC Television in Great Britain, and then given general distribution as a set of films for independent showing; and during which he also collaborated with the Swiss director Alain Tanner on the making of three feature films, all of which were released in this country in the early to middle 1970s. Berger's authority, as a spokesman for feminist viewpoints and a commentator on the popular media, particularly photography and advertising, and his larger reputation as a countercultural figure derive from these films, especially "Ways of Seeing," rather than from his earlier and later writings: art criticism, novels, and essays of various kinds. Reference to the latter, though it brings up interesting anticipations and parallels, is therefore not germane to the present context; and even the book *Ways of Seeing* based on the films, which eliminates some elements of both text and image and substitutes others, will be used only for token reference.[1]

Basic points underlying this limitation of scope are that Berger's career has always, seemingly by conscious choice on his part as well as for conceptual reasons, been divided into distinctive phases (as in his decision of 5 years ago to live in a small village in the Haute-Savoie, which coincided with, as well as enforced, the end of his period of filmmaking that had had its start in the late 1950s in programs made for the BBC Monitor series); and that his position as a countercultural critic depends crucially and centrally on devices of visual presentation which are not duplicable in textual form but rather are specifically keyed to the "democratic" media of film and television and to the interrelationships of image and spoken commentary which those media have built into their intrinsic nature, or ontology.

The term "counterculture," as used by sociologists and anthropologists—for the Californian scene of the later 1960s, especially the campus riots, but also more generally, in reference to other groups, coalitions, and lifestyles of youth and to corresponding developments in Western Europe—denotes, to quote one definition in its entirety, "norms and patterns of behavior, emerging institutions and beliefs and artistic traditions that have coalesced to provide an alternative to the cultural templates of the main culture."[2] In historical retrospect, it has become clearer than it was at the time that the widespread disaffection and disaffiliation from the dominant patterns of culture that prevailed among middle-class youth in the 1960s linked up toward the end of the decade with the more openly political forces of student protest and community action, only to become progressively fragmented, after 1970, into separate strands and subgroups (some Utopian, some activist).[3] This is a relevant point, in regard to timing as well as subject matter and approach, for the period in which the films to be discussed were made and gained recognition, especially among the young and on campuses.

As for the crystallization within the counterculture of a distinctive aesthetic stance and of a related set of attitudes toward the arts, it appears crucial for this purpose that two features should be present and at work simultaneously. One of these is the prevalence of a relationship between the art form and its audience that serves to express symbolic forms of linkage between the participants (as in the rock festivals of the 1960s or in guerilla theater); the other, that there should be, within the culture as a whole, certain figures who serve as paradigms or, in a larger sense, as social and moral exemplars. These two features together provide for the counterculture what the anthropologist Victor Turner has termed an "antistructure," together with an appeal to *communitas.*[4] The antistructure functions in evident and self-regulating contrast to the prevailing norms of order and restraint within society: which is to say, in the case of the arts, to the prevailing canons of composition and aesthetic decorum. At the same time, the paradigmatic figures of the counterculture are ones who use their ideas and writings to bring the contradictions of contemporary society and its workings out into the open. Typical figures who fulfilled such a role for the youthful and campus-oriented counterculture of the later 1960s were Herbert Marcuse, for social and political thought; Allan Ginsberg, for poetry; and Jonas Mekas, for "underground" (experimental and cooperatively distributed) film. Berger himself, in his criticism and in the films to be discussed, uses in similar fashion the writings of Gramsci and Walter Benjamin alongside those of Marx and his twentieth-century followers; but it is important for his purpose that, in order to make such figures serve as paradigms for the discussion of the visual arts, their ideas be articulated visually in reference to specific works (or a sequence of them) rather than simply quoted or paraphrased. The example of Ginsberg also brings out how the appeal to *communitas,* which affirms symbolic forms of linkage among viewers or listeners, may be expressed in forms of self-dramatization—as for example in those kinds of performance art which use the body for subject— as well as in ritual performances such as the Happenings of Allan Kaprow, which were orchestrated to allow for a full measure of participatory intervention on the part of the audience.

That John Berger should himself have become such a figure in the early to mid-1970s appears to depend, against this background, on at least three interlocking factors. First of all, he used for the purposes referred to two visual media—TV and film—with a particular potential now for reaching a widespread audience and establishing a sense of rapport in that audience: ones that, for the presentation of social and cultural subject matter, could give the appearance of coming across in easy and familiar fashion, registering their points either directly or without (from the countercultural standpoint) any of the distancing effects belonging to the lecture hall, the traditional proscenium theater, or the documentary film about artists and art. The first segment of "Ways of Seeing" in fact includes a direct attack on what familiar theatricalizing devices, such as music or an accompanying caption, can do to the presentation and promotion of works of art (Berger's example is van Gogh's supposed "last painting," *Crows over a Wheatfield*), by the kind of false insinuation that they succeed in creating.[5] This problem of cultural affect was one that neither commercial cinema nor commercial TV in the 1960s, even at their most successful, was able to overcome. Basically, what had tended to happen was that either the audience became polarized according to levels of cultural sophistication or the demands of a conventionalized format, from program to program, became quite rapidly seen as being imaginatively restrictive.[6] But it was not simply the freedom given by the BBC for the making of "Ways of Seeing" or Alain Tanner's independent status as filmmaker that counted in this regard; there was in both cases a larger conception of the ways in which the use of these particular media could open up audience response.

Second, Berger used as a springboard, for discussion and argued presentation in visual form, key issues of the time which, as questionings of conventional or inherited attitudes, were gathering cultural force. These key issues included, in the films made with Tanner, the exploitation by capitalist industry of the female work force and of cheap immigrant labor; and in "Ways of Seeing" the presentation of the female body in Western art, which was a topic of growing feminist concern, and the way in which modern museums and other organizations representing the art establishment treated the work of art as a consumer item to be packaged, in its display and presentation, for the supposed educational benefit of an unprivileged audience. All of these topics could be readily understood as hallmarks of a social as well as cultural dissent from the way in which those in positions of power and ownership inherently considered works of art and made them function to the enhancement of their own entrenched standing

in society. Again, this questioning becomes the subject of one specific segment in "Ways of Seeing": the one that deals with oil paintings (still life, some forms of landscape with figures) as an implicit assertion of the ownership of property.[7]

Finally, there is and always has been the interest and attractiveness to Berger—for here one is dealing with a general theme in his criticism—of those who may be called "fringe radicals" of the art scene, and those artists who deliberately present themselves as somehow "primitive" in sensibility, compared to the ruling conventions of art and system of art production in any particular period.[8] In Berger's most recent volume of collected essays, *About Looking* (1980), this double focus of interest extends to include a later-nineteenth-century Turkish follower of Courbet, Seker Ahmet; Lowry, a British painter of the Industrial North; and, in an essay titled "The Primitive and the Professional," the Douanier Rousseau.[9] The work of such artists is interpreted, broadly, either as a reflection of their underlying cultural displacement (Ahmet) or as embodying nostalgia for a period of time that has long since vanished into history (Lowry). Their situation is, therefore, akin in principle to the plight of some of the key characters in the three Tanner films: "marginal" figures in society or in relation to the work force, in whom isolation can equally serve as a source of potential strength;[10] and it stands in symbolic opposition to the situation of successful modern "impresarios" of the art scene, most typically Picasso, whom Berger had earlier (1965) used as a complete case history to this effect.[11] In "Ways of Seeing" attention is turned comparably to the "exceptional nudes" in the history of Western painting (such as those of Rubens and Rembrandt)[12]—as if this exceptionality could be immediately and directly recognized, simply from the character of the visual image itself. Berger's linking of exceptionality in art to an anti-conventional quality of social perception evades the need for his selective treatment of particular themes in art (nudes, still lifes) to be given any developmental outcome in the twentieth century.[13] It is also a strategy that allows socially and economically successful figures in the establishment view of twentieth-century art, such as Picasso and Matisse, to be left out, as if they belonged to a totally other world than the one that concerns him.

To turn now to the three films co-authored by Berger in collaboration with Alain Tanner, *La Salamandre* (1970), *Le Milieu du Monde* (1974), and *Jonas Qui Aura 25 Ans en L'An 2000* (1975),[14] the countercultural aspects of these films reside in forms of visual structure and devices of presentation adopted as much as in the subject matter itself.

This is in accord with the role given already in the first of these films to voice-over commentary—Berger's contribution there to an existing story line—as a way of putting into fuller perspective the happenings of the film and serving, in so doing, as an "interlocutory" bridge between these happenings and the film's audience.[15] It is also in accord with the way in which, in the second of the three films, Berger worked even more closely with Tanner to deepen the motivations of the characters and to develop techniques of narration that would set into a larger explanatory framework both the interrelationships of the characters and the ordering of events.[16] The same can be presumed also of the third film, which takes the events of 1968 in Western Europe as its thematic starting point. Here only special or typically representative aspects of the three films will be taken up.

The story of *The Salamander* (to give the films their English titles from now on) has to do with two young journalists and their attempt to discover the truth about an incident in which a young woman, Rosamonde, may or may not have shot her uncle, which in turn is to be the basis for a fictional TV drama. The way in which the string of episodes which begins from this point then develops goes against all the standard assumptions that an audience is likely to have about narrative unfolding and final resolution in the structure of a film. The journalists, whether relying on direct interviewing or on their imagination, do not learn anything that they hoped and expected to learn—except perhaps that they gain some understanding of the nature of the young woman's menial and mechanical job, in a sausage factory, and of her character from the brief sexual involvement that each of them has with her. At one point she herself even denies what the audience knows to be true from an inset scene at the beginning of the film; namely; that she was present in the room when the gun went off. The countercultural aspect of the film thus lies in its denial, by means of both plot and commentary, of there being any interconnective web of "truth" to the actual nature and extent of the young woman's involvement in the shooting, or even any underlying principle of a moral sort in her subjective comprehension of what took place. The audience is invited to participate, both emotionally and on the basis of personal experience, in the reconstruction of what might have been the case, rather than having the outcome and the paths to that outcome dictated to it by predetermined fiat on the director's part (in what Tanner calls a "relationship of domination");[17] and this in turn becomes a bond of sympathy toward the young woman and against the intruding journalists, as the extent of the gap between them and her, in self-image and in morality, begins to be perceived as such.

The Center of the Earth, the second of the three films in order of release, has as its subject the love affair of a young Italian woman, who, because of lack of work in her own country, has taken a job as a café waitress in Switzerland, and an engineer whom she meets there, who is running for political office at the time and finds himself discredited when this involvement is used against him by his opponents. The title refers both to the part of Switzerland where the action takes place— so known in local parlance, from its chance geographical situation—and in a secondary pun which the woman herself introduces, when she first invites the man to make love to her ("Take me home and I will show you the center of the earth"), and to the sexuality of a woman's body as a source of a personal and deep-seated consciousness. The structure of the film's unfolding, again with voice-over commentary, is geared to the conditions and chronology of an affair spread over a period of 112 days in all: a passage of time which is both specifically counted out in blocks or units and explicatively used, as the relationship between the two develops (she in her café serving customers' needs, he campaigning and also coming over the mountain to see her) and then veers toward its close, which is marked by her decision to return to Italy. The most crucial antistructural aspect here—the one that most strikingly runs counter to accepted cinematic practice—is a visual matter, of what the viewer is given to look at, during chronological breaks or passages which put the action into context, and how the camera treats or actualizes its subject matter in those cases. There are, for instance, segments in which the camera holds in view for a considerable length of time a horizontal stretch of plowed field—presumably one in that part of the world, but with little intrinsic interest except for its being seen in different seasonal states of verdancy or bareness at different junctures in the film. As for the appeal to symbolic forms of linkage, this comes across particularly in the contrasting typology of the man's and the woman's activities, the ultimate reason for her decision to go home, which at the end of the film—as she sits waiting with a fellow waitress for her train—she feels no call to justify further.

For *Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000,* it may have been primarily a decision of Tanner's, before joint work on the scenario, that the cast of characters should amount to a virtual lexicon of the attitudes and behavior patterns of young people who, after the disturbances of 1968 to 1972, found themselves displaced or in transitional positions in relation to normative society. The outlooks on life and forms of affirmation that the film depicts include

opposition to consumption for its own sake and to materialism; the cult of freedom and libertarian impulses; and the transcending of roles, breaking of gender distinctions, and upholding of fraternal individualism. The behavior patterns put on view are ones that devolve around an ethic of "leaderlessness" and of "participation"; and the acting out situates itself in a context of work-as-play, life-as-art, commune-as-enclave, and "free school."[18] More important, however, to the structure of the film is the fact that these attitudes and forms of behavior are seen realizing themselves or finding an outlet in ways that are visually presented as zany, bizarre, unpredictable, and at the same time appealing in their directness and humor, a characteristic example being the scene in which the schoolteacher punctuates and illustrates his lesson about the nature of history with the chopping of a sausage. As the different sets of characters come into one another's purview, their behavior patterns are seen by the viewer as expanded by this contact and as converging into ritualized forms which, as in the mudbath sequence (probably a fantasy, since it is inset in black-and-white), affirm the unity and cohesion of the group. The questions raised in this way—of what it means to teach history in the classroom or to interact in a truly physical sense with friends and associates—pose themselves visually in opposition to the norms of routine and of decorum; and the claim made for the group is that of a transcending possibility, or moment, in their relations, whatever else may succeed it as the film winds down.

The comparable features of presentation and structure in "Ways of Seeing" can be brought into focus by way of a contrast with Lord Clark's TV series of the later 1960s, "Civilisation," a series which was extremely successful and internationally distributed as a cultural offering of a traditionally British and humanistic kind.[19] Berger's own aliveness to the total difference of tenor between his films and "Civilisation" is in fact more than a hypothesis, for in his early novel *A Painter of Our Time* (1958) there is a chapter in which the central character of the novel, a Hungarian refugee artist, is taken to visit a collector and aesthete in the south of England who is clearly modeled after Sir Kenneth (as he then was) Clark. He accidentally breaks a valuable Chinese vase while being shown around, and is then forced into expressing his disgust by the way in which the collector treats the loss, as if it were nothing and he did not particularly care for or value the vase.

In the "Civilisation" series Clark impresses the viewer with his cultural as well as his geographical mobility; with the sense of intimacy he conveys with the worlds of both art and intellect, constantly linking the two together; and with his quiet politeness and discretion of tone—even when standing in the broiling sun, in a double-breasted suit and tie, in front of the Pyramids—which, like the tone attributed to the collector in the novel, has *grand-seigneurial* implications. He appears, in the way in which the films are put together and his presence is used, as capable of freely shifting, without strain, from one artistic locale to another and of entering into the domains of art and artistic creation, whether in their public or their most private forms, on equal terms with them. In addition, he offers an essentially pessimistic view of the forces of industrialization and modernization (Manhattan becomes a vision of hell), on the basis of a gloomy acknowledgment that, come what may, "the poor will be always with us." From Berger's point of view, therefore, the use of the powers of television in this series to make the reception of art seem congenially pleasant and effortless is loaded, visually as well as socially, with reactionary overtones.

Berger's relationship with his audience, in contrast, when he appears on the screen in "Ways of Seeing," is marked by directness, and even button-holing in character. This is emphasized visually by the flat and plain blue background, pushing his body forward and placing him as close as possible to the viewer, almost as if he were leaning out. Strongly marked hand gestures and eye movements, also directed outward, go along with a use of the voice that is equally opposed to decorum in its thrusts and emphases. Also as a matter of principle, Berger does not intervene into our relationship with the image, by interposing himself between it and us or by appearing in the same space with it. Rather he alternates between voice-over commentary setting out the terms in which to understand what happens, in our experience of visual images, and putting the implications that he draws from this up front, and segments of direct address which split up the temporal sequencing—in opposition, as in the films, to the sense of an ongoing flow—and affirm a standpoint at once both programmatic and personal.

As to the pressures imposed by the modern world on the experience and creation of art, these Berger accepts, but he is in no way condemning and allows for a regenerative kind of artistic insight. In the TV version of "Ways of Seeing" certain elements specific to the presentation, not reproducible in book form, make a vital contribution here. The effects of multiplication as visually shown, in the segment dealing with the reproduction of works of

art, and the juxtapositions of billboard and street in the final part, on the fantasy wishes catered to by glamor photography and publicity advertising, combine an appeal to the communities of shared experience with the general aim of "demystifying" culture, in ways which make the more historically oriented parts, on the nude and on subjects implying possession, seem less successful by comparison.[20] But it is Berger's use of his own persona throughout, both as a link between visual expositions and as "interlocutor" (the term used by Tanner for the films), that finally carries the most weight. Frank and direct, often irritating or too crudely assertive, it is this aspect of Berger as critic that serves, counterculturally, as the linchpin of the series.

Notes

1 Published in Britain in 1972, by the BBC in cooperation with Penguin Books, and reprinted almost annually since; first published in the United States by Viking Press in 1973 and then as a Penguin paperback in 1977.

2 Michael Lerner, "Anarchism and the American Counter-Culture," *Government and Opposition* 5, no. 4 (1970):433. The concept was first introduced by Theodore Roszak, *The Making of Counter Culture,* New York (1969). See also Victor Turner's writings, note 4 below; Milton J. Younger, "Countraculture and Subculture," *American Sociological Review* 25 (1960):635-638, repr. in *The Sociology of Subcultures,* D. D. Arnold, ed. (Berkeley, Calif · 1970); and Joseph Berke, ed., *Counter Culture* (London: Peter Owen, 1969), which includes an essay on the cinema, discussing filmmakers' cooperatives in New York and London. I am grateful to Michel Oren for helping me with these and other references.

3 John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts, "Subcultures, Cultures and Class: A Theoretical Overview," *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain,* S. Hall and T. Jefferson, eds. (London: Hutchinson, 1976), pp. 57-71. For an attempt to use the term for a much earlier period, see Robert O'Kell, "The Victorian Counter-Culture: An Interdisciplinary Conference" (held at Univ. of Southern Florida, February-March 1974), *Victorian Studies* 17, no. 4 (1974):431-435, with comments on the looseness and malleability with which the term was applied there.

4 Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: 1969), and *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* (Ithaca, N.Y.: 1974), with some extension of the argument in later writings of his. See also Barbara C. Meyerhoff, "The Revolution as Trip: Symbol and Paradox," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 395 (May 1971; Student Protest Issue):105-116; Sherry R. Turkel, "Symbol and Festival in the French Student Uprising" (May-June 1968), in *Symbols and Politics in Communal Ideology; Cases and Questions,* Sally Falk Moore and Barbara C. Meyerhoff, eds. (Ithaca, N.Y.: 1975), pp. 68-100; and Dick Hebdidge, *Subculture; The Meaning of Style* (London, Methuen: 1969).

5 *Ways of Seeing,* 27f.

6 Familiar examples to consider here would be *Easy Rider* (as compared to the early films of Godard) and the comedy program "Laugh-In." The problems of what to show on educational TV devolve, in the late 1960s and 1970s, within a similar framework.

7 Part II of the film version includes discussion with a group of women of different ages, and Part I uses the National Gallery in London as its opening focus. Neither element is duplicated in book form.

8 A comparable figure of the early nineteenth century would be Blake—before the term counterculture becomes appropriate for such figures; see Martin Green, *Cities of Light and Sons of the Morning* (Boston-Toronto: 1972), Chap. 3, in support of this.

9 *About Looking* (New York: 1980); (1979), pp. 79-86; (1966), pp. 87-95; and (1976), p. 67.

10 Cf. here Berger's *A Seventh Man* (Penguin Books: 1975), a collaboration with the photographer Jean Mohr.

11 *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (Penguin Books: 1965), the best known of Berger's critical writings, which seems to have fundamentally affected the critical estimate of the later Picasso.

12 *Ways of Seeing,* pp. 57f., 66f.

13 *Ibid.,* Parts 2-3, 4-5.

14 Released in the United States in 1972, 1974, and 1976, respectively.

15 Berger's narrative for *A City at Chandigarh* (1966) had been the very first collaboration, in which Berger had interwoven his commentary with literary quotations. See further here Michael Tarantino, "Tanner and Berger: The Voice Off-Screen," *Film Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (Winter 1979-1980):32-49, which draws on Tanner's words as published in *Cinema, mort ou vif* (Zurich, Film-collective: 1977), and on the script of *La Salamandre,* published by L'Avant-Scene Cinema, no. 125 (May 1972), including an interview with Tanner.

16 Michel Boujut, "*Le Milieu du Monde* ou le cinema selon Tanner," (Lausanne: Editions l'Age d'Homme, 1974), pp. 29-31, and see also Tarantino, 38f.

17 See Note 15.

18 See Clark, Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts, p. 70: a table listing all of these countercultural attributes and the middle- or lower-class values to which they oppose themselves.

19 Published by the BBC as a book in 1969.

20 See *Ways of Seeing,* pp. 23-26 (for reproduction) and p. 142 (for billboard and street).

Berger on the Female Nude

John Berger's account of the female nude in Chapter 3 of his *Ways of Seeing* both exhibits his position as a counterculture figure and raises a number of issues of interest for their own sake. Though this may not have been Berger's original intent, his analysis can be nicely placed in opposition to Lord Clark's magisterial Mellon lectures, published as *The Nude*. As in the TV series of these two men, the contrast here is both one of personal style and, more deeply, of opposing views of the uses of art in society. Clark, a great scholar, traces elegantly the history of different forms of the nude. Only very tangentially does he mention issues which become central for Berger: that (female) nudes are in our culture almost always made by men for men to see, and that this cultural "bias"—if that word can be used first in just a descriptive sense—has important implications for how we see the nude. To say Berger's account is a popular or even journalistic one is not to suggest it is simple. Rather, in his brief and very condensed remarks Berger uses a number of interconnected ideas which need unpacking. Though a number of feminist writers have used these remarks as their own starting point,[1] what is lacking, still, is a proper historical placement of this argument.

Following Berger's own characteristic procedure, in which a particular artwork directly expresses or "shows" a certain view of the world, consider one painting of a woman which illustrates his view of the depiction of women. In a picture of a woman trying on a hat, Meyer Schapiro argues, Degas (Figure 1) crops the picture so that

> two distinct acts of seeing are projected here: one of a viewer inside the picture, the second of an implied outer viewer—the first without the object she sees, the other no less actual than the first through the near perspective of the depicted objects of his glance.[2]

What Schapiro calls a "simile of the aesthetic… selfconsciousness" is, for Berger, a revelation of the woman's consciousness. She can only see herself indirectly, as she imagines herself to appear to a (male) other. In general, but most especially in erotic contexts, women are, according to Berger, treated as passive, as things. Alienated from themselves, and treated as if they were objects on display for the active (male) viewer, they can see themselves only in this indirect fashion. It's interesting to see how a contemporary erotic artist like Balthus uses this idea (in, for example, *Nude in Front of a Mantel,* Figure 2), frequently showing his depicted women absorbed in themselves in mirrors.

Figure 1   Edgar Degas. *At the Milliner's* (1882). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.


An immediate problem with this analysis lies in the way Berger produces what he takes to be evidence that this is how, notwithstanding some special exceptions, Western painting has characteristically treated women. Comparing a detail of an Ingres *Odalisque* with a photograph from a popular magazine or seeing Bronzino's *Allegory of Time and Love* in a way such that

> the complicated symbolism which lies behind this painting need not concern us now because it does not affect its sexual appeal—at the first degree,[3]

may seem puzzling. For this discussion comes immediately after an account of Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," where description of the differences between photographs and paintings suggests that such a direct comparison of photographs and paintings is a dangerously ahistorical procedure. And, in his book on Picasso, Berger[4] objects to that artist treating the subject matter of a picture indifferently:

Figure 2   Balthasar Balthus. *Nude in Front of a Mantel* (1955). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 3   Paolo Veronese. *Mars and Venus United by Love* (ca. 1576-1584). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
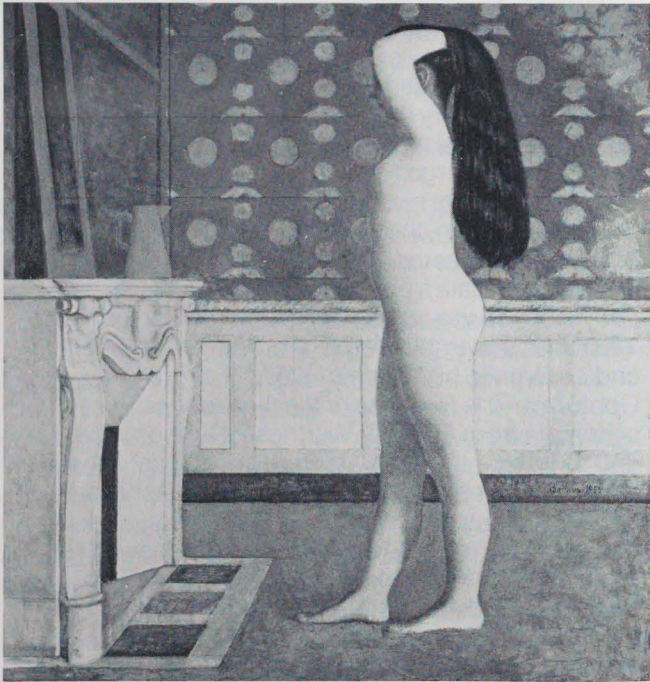
> The meaning of a Venus and Cupid...is totally different from that of a Virgin and Child, even when the latter is secular and has lost its religious conviction. The two subjects depend on an utterly different agreement being imagined between painter and spectator.

Consider one painting which has, for us, a direct and obvious erotic appeal. Botticelli's *Primavera* was conceived by the Neo-Platonist Ficino as a picture *of* the importance of virtue:

> One cannot describe how much more easily the sight of Beauty inspires love than words can do. If...we could present the wonderful aspect of Virtue itself to the eyes of men there would no longer be any need for our art of persuasion....[5]

The painting, by its immediate appeal to the eye, is more effective than an intellectual or verbal argument. For us, surely, for whom this intellectual world is very remote, seeing the painting in these terms is difficult. But is it not arguable that to treat the picture merely in terms of its erotic appeal is to lose sight of the larger part of its original significance? If so, then how can an analysis of *Primavera*-as-a-

pinup actually tell us anything about the history of European beliefs about the female nude?

When, for example, we see a picture like Paolo Veronese's *Mars and Venus United by Love* (Figure 3), we can recognize it both as a work with a directly erotic power and as a painting which can be understood only when placed in its context of traditional mythology.[5] We need to ask: How are these two kinds of ways of viewing it related? For example, is it like seeing the famous rabbit-duck figure which we see first as a rabbit only and then as a duck? Or do these two ways of seeing the picture combine into one unified visual experience?

Here Berger's account needs some development. I want to consider three points—idealization, the status of the model herself, and the relation of imagination to erotic picturing, all discussed in his account—and suggest that they can be linked together by drawing on Gombrich's account of representation. What Gombrich's account offers, I will argue, is a way of understanding the history of the development of the nude, which is precisely the aspect of Berger's account that needs working out.

According to Renaissance art critics, particular individuals are only imperfect realizations of ideal or perfect forms.[6] When depicting a particular person, artists idealize that person, not showing them, pimples and all, as they actually appear. This account is, paradoxically, an application of a Platonic theory of forms to art. (Paradoxically because for Plato the forms are supersensible; for him the theory of forms shows that art cannot be truthful.) Now, applied to the nude, such seeing of individuals as imperfect versions of some ideal shows, for Berger, "a remarkable indifference to who any one person really was."[7] A consideration of *Playboy* centerfold types of erotic art suggests how this account could be used to make an explicitly feminist point. The aim of centerfolds is to be arousing, and so they show what presumably are ideals of desirable women. Only quite young women, of a certain relatively narrowly defined body type, are shown. Insofar as such pictures perform a role of cultural conditioning—and we hardly need Gay Talese to tell us that—they influence how men think of their desire for actual women and how women think of themselves. The connection with Berger's general view, that women tend to see themselves as men see them, is clear. For in a great deal of both popular and feminist literature the way that many women are obsessively unhappy about their own bodies is described. For example:

> Most of us tend to feel there are just two kinds of breasts—our own, which are too tiny, too big, too low, too high…too whatever…and "those perfect ones" that belong to other women.[8]

If we consider, in addition, that such idealized depictions can be generated only by carefully doctoring photographs, then the irony of this procedure should be clear. *Playboy* starts with

> a real form, the nude female body, and manufacture(s) an ideal. It is something real, dressed up to be an ideal; it is a lie.…Because it is a photograph…the lie is believed as truth, and men proceed…to seek the ideal, nonexistent body.[9]

It isn't surprising that some early, unidealized photographs were mistrusted by artists. "The inevitable vulgarities of real life—the inelegances, the misproportions, the coarse blemishes—ludicrously asserted themselves."[10] Photographs of the nude only looked truthful when they looked like paintings of the nude. Erving Goffman's *Gender Advertisements* traces very thoroughly, and with many pictorial examples, the ways women are depicted in photographs as being, typically, passive and subordinate to men. Following Berger, what might be added to Goffman's account is that most of the poses he describes can be found in many paintings as well.

Gombrich's account in *Art and Illusion* of what he calls schemata provides a different approach to understanding idealization. In one sense of "schema" the schemata are the starting point for the making of a particular picture, a repertoire of given visual forms which an artist can modify to suit a particular situation.[11] Thus, what are described in the various chapters of Clark's *The Nude* are the various schemata for the nude as they evolve historically. By the period from the late eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century this traditional use of schemata undergoes a crisis. (Saying this is one way of describing the larger crisis in painting when the traditional subject matter—grand history painting, art of religion and mythology—is abandoned in favor of an "art of contemporary life.") When Reynolds quotes schemata from Michelangelo in his portrait, *Lady Cockburn and her Children;*[12] or Benjamin West uses schemata from Rembrandt, Van Dyck, and Le Brun in his *Death of Wolfe;*[13] or Thomas Couture in *The Romans of the Decadence* uses schemata from Tiepolo, Veronese, Rubens, Poussin, and Ingres[14]—then the way, traditionally, schemata have been used seems to change. Now schemata are used in inappropriate or strained ways, and recognizing them becomes a test of the viewer's erudition. (As many recent critical accounts of Manet have observed, it is this use of quotations from the old masters which often makes both the meaning and the pictorial composition of his art problematic.) Using such schemata becomes a bit like quoting from Latin or Greek in one's personal correspondence. When these languages cease to be the instruments of intellectual intercourse, such erudition comes to seem a bit affected.

But if we think of idealization in these ways suggested by Gombrich, then we may reach quite a different view of idealization from Berger. The function of idealizing schemata is not so much to leave us indifferent to particular individuals as to diffuse or partially neutralize the erotic power of paintings. In Lord Clark's words: we are distanced from "the obsessive, unreasonable nature of physical desire" by using schemata, "a form by which Venus may cease to be vulgar and become celestial."[15] To treat a Bronzino Venus as if she were a desirable-looking woman, with a perfect (i.e., ideal) body, is to short-circuit the intended purpose of that idealization. She *is* Venus, not a pretty model posing as Venus. This point might be reinforced with reference to Gombrich's general account of representation. (I merely note briefly here a point he elaborates in his "Meditations on a Hobby Horse,"[16] which I will discuss at length in another essay.) Originally, the function of a representation was to be a substitute for, and in that sense "to be," the desired object.

Pygmalion, making a sculpture of a woman and desiring a woman, found that his sculpture *became* the woman he desired. At this level, the distinction between *making a representation* or replica of a thing and *making that thing* disappears. And even now, in erotic fantasies, or aggressive attacks on representations—as when we poke pins through the eyes in a photograph—the representation is thought of, in one corner of our mind, as simply being what it represents. But in the development of culture, this biological foundation of representation is sublimated, or distanced, by giving representations other sorts of significance. A Venus is, then, both a sexy picture of a desirable woman and a goddess whose form suggests the ineffable Form, Beauty. To treat her as just an attractive woman is only to consider one dimension of the picture.

This point can be elaborated by considering the function of the artist's model. Manet's *Olympia,* it has often been noted, has a different status from the Titian *Venus* which serves as its schema.[17] The Manet figure is clearly a contemporary woman playing a role. Even if we imagine—any such account is, of course, only a useful simplification—both Titian and Manet painting from a model, their procedures would still in this respect be essentially different. Titian uses a model to paint a depiction of Venus, a picture in which we see the model. (A similar point could be made about Manet's Christ. If, as many contemporaries thought, it seems irreligious, that is because what we see is not "Christ depicted," but rather "the depiction of a model portrayed as Christ.") This argument is, I think, compatible with the point made with great force in Anne Hollander's discussion of the nude in her *Seeing Through Clothes:* that the style of the nude has changed historically in relation to changing styles of dress. For, allowing that Titian and Manet show different "body types," the further point is that with Titian but not Manet we see the depicted figure as something more than just a model.

This contrast between seeing a depicted woman as Venus and seeing her as a model posing as Venus might be given more clarity by seeing the changing ways in which nineteenth-century artists themselves thought of the model. One interesting example is the curious paintings, by Ingres and others, of Raphael and his mistress.[18] The implication of such pictures—as when she is shown sitting on his lap, with her depiction as a Madonna in the painting behind her—is that Raphael's Madonnas are depictions of the actual woman he loved. (In his essay on the Raphael *Madonna della Sedia* Gombrich quotes further examples of such stories.[19]) Aside from the break with traditional ideas of decorum, what's suggestive here is the fantasy that the idealized depicted woman is in fact a straightforward copy of some actual, ideal woman.

In sixteenth-century art theorizing, by contrast—and as Raphael himself is reported to have said—the idealized depiction does not show any actual individual.

This nineteenth-century interpretation of the artist's relation to his model corresponds, then, to a very literal understanding of the use of schemata. So, when nineteenth-century artists use schemata from the old masters, the effect seems inappropriate just because the context of art has changed so much. The English gentlewoman depicted by Reynolds cannot, without considerable strain, be assimilated to a Michelangelo figure. And Couture's scene of the decadent Romans' attempts to work within a tradition of grand history painting which is no longer viable. It's interesting that copying old master works, a prominent part of art school training of this period, was thought of as "a form of sympathetic magic," a way of making contact at a distance, through time, with a past whose standards were very different from those of the present. To say that after 1800 we have a split between "the anaemic, smooth and frigid beauty of classicism and...a cult of the ugly, the forceful, and the demythicized,"[20] as Hetzer does, is too simple. Rather, the masters as well as the academic artists of this period sought this return to the past. But a Degas, unlike Couture, could seek this magical contact in ways that are both ironically playful and serious. Thus, he parodies Ingres's *Apotheosis of Homer* in a photograph[21] but then turns to judge the composition of that photograph in terms of the original painting. And he sketches a Giorgione, but adding a contemporary couple "who appear to look at the Giorgione, so that the spatially neutral page is converted into an illusion of a wall in the Louvre." And when he and others, especially Manet and Cézanne, depict paintings or sculptures within their paintings, they sometimes relate a contemporary scene to the old master art shown, while at other times asserting their independence from, or distance from, the past.

Berger's account of the nude can be approached in a third way—also related to Gombrich's account of representation—by considering the role of imagination in viewing erotic pictures. Berger deals with this question in an essay in *The Moment of Cubism* when he compares a nude photograph with Rubens' portrait of his second wife.[22] His three criteria for the "superiority" of the Rubens—that it transcends the moment shown, admits the spectator's subjectivity, and does not simply treat the viewer as a voyeur— all relate closely to the role of imagination. Here, again, Berger's very brief account needs unpacking.

In his essay "Psychoanalysis and the History of Art"[23] Gombrich suggests that erotic content in paintings is made more acceptable by being counterbalanced by a certain difficulty in seeing what is

Figure 4   Pierre Bonnard. *Nude in Bathtub* (ca. 1938-1941).
Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh.

depicted. "An increase in such active participation…
may be accompanied by an easing of conventional
taboos." To return to his point about "the hobby
horse," the quality of an erotic artwork as a
substitute gratification is sublimated. Otherwise the
picture is judged unaesthetic, "too literal," Michael
Podro remarks, "in its appeal for us to gain any
satisfaction other than the satisfaction we want from
reality."[24] Podro offers a further example, a Bonnard
nude (*Nude in a Bathtub,* Figure 4):

> What is fascinating is to watch Bonnard eliminating
> visual cues and stepping up the overall pattern and
> so loosening our grasp of the girl's body…by producing
> this greater uncertainty, the element of sexual projection
> is stimulated enormously.[25]

Evidence for this argument can be found in
nineteenth-century French debates about the relative
merits of the sketch and the finished work. Though
sketching played an important role in academic
training—in ways Boime's useful *The Academy and
French Painting in the 19th Century* describes in
detail—sketchiness in a finished work was judged
to be undesirable.[26] What was radical about Manet
and the Impressionists was not their interest in sketchi-
ness but their insistence that a finished work could
be sketchy.

To put this point in the terms of Gombrich's account,
the relative sketchiness of Impressionist and post-
Impressionist nudes allows us to find such works
satisfying, while a Bougereau is embarrassingly, and

so unerotically, literal. Saying this is not to deny
that even academic artists were aware of such
issues. Art school students first drew from casts,
so that when they got to live models they were
"conditioned to see…the poses of the live model
generally resembled those of antique statues…the
live model appeared as a kind of living statue."
This shows, as I noted earlier, the importance of
schemata. The additional claim I am now making
is that the projection required to see a sketchy
or painterly picture achieves the same effect as
the schemata, but in a different way. By requiring
effort on the viewer's part, sketchy pictures again
assert the importance of an "aesthetic distance."
Sketchiness, like the use of schemata, is a way
of insisting that what we see is not just a lifelike
woman standing before us, but a depiction, difficult
for the eye to read and categorized in terms of
traditional types of nudes.

Berger's account of the Rubens portrait of Hélène
Fourment suggests how this point about the erotic
use of imagination can be generalized.[27] What
distances us, and gives us pleasure, is the (perceptual)
difficulty in getting the picture in focus. Showing
the model sketchily depicted, or turning her body,
engages our eye while distancing us from her *qua*
individual. Our erotic response, we might say, is
not straightforwardly to what we look through the
picture surface to see as much as to the picture
itself. In pinups, the model is made to look erotic;
in a Bonnard or Rubens, it is the painting itself
which is erotic. More recent erotic photographs might
be analyzed in these terms. In contrast to more
traditional pinups with pose indirectly derived from
traditional painting, the goal now seems to be to
make a direct appeal to exhibitionism and voyeurism.
Thus, where Ingres or Courbet could engage our
imagination by using waterspouts as metaphors for
hidden genitals, now we have very unsublimated
depictions. The effect, if Gombrich's account is
correct, is to reduce nudes to their more primitive
function of what he calls "releasors," or substitutes
for the thing they depict. It is not accidental, in
this view, that such an abolition of aesthetic distance
is connected with the obvious and often grotesque
misogyny found in such pictures.

Having now unpacked Berger's account of idealiza-
tion, the status of the model, and imagination in
depictions of the nude, what now can be said about
the validity of his original account? Two points might
be made. First, what Berger takes to be the charac-
teristics of traditional Western nudes which exhibit
the alienation of woman—idealization, the use of
stereotyped poses—in fact function within that tradition
in a somewhat different way. By insisting that the
depiction is not *of* some actual person, these devices
maintain an aesthetic distance of the spectator from

the artwork. Though stimulated by what the work depicts, the spectator is also reminded that it is only a depiction. And, as many feminist critiques of pornography have noted, the breakdown of this aesthetic distance may have quite problematic consequences. If we follow Gombrich in believing that the aim of civilization is to control our aggressive instincts[28]— and here his work needs placement in relation to Freud, Nietzsche, and perhaps also the character of Aschenbach in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*— then breaking down such controls may be far from liberating. Second, Berger is entirely correct to see how such erotic imagery, today taken out of its original historical context, now functions. And given that the pictorial traditions which "upheld" that erotic distance are no longer viable, and can be now seen as "working" only at the price of some self-deception— "The so-called grand manner," even Lord Clark writes, "deadened our sense of truth, even our sense of moral responsibility"[29]— what is to be done? One need not agree with Berger's discussions of such problems in every detail, or even less his "politics" and proposed solution to the problems, to admire him for raising issues which the conventional "art lovers" he so often criticizes fail even to be aware of.

Ironically, what I have said about the differences between the historical view of the nude and the way we view it today is a point perhaps made, implicitly at least, in another part of Berger's own work. In his novel *G.* he retells the story of Don Juan, presenting him as a feminist *avant la lettre* who, by treating women as unique individuals rather than the property of a man, gives these women the possibility of acting freely. The character G. himself can do this, we are to understand, because his own atypical, and in that sense "privileged," upbringing has failed to make him internalize bourgeois moral standards. Here Berger does what I have described painters as doing; he takes an inherited schema— the Don Juan myth—and attempts to modify it to apply it to early-twentieth-century life. Parts of what he says in the book about the relation between a general account—a picture or verbal description—of an experience and that particular experience are important, I think, for understanding our response to the erotic art he discusses in *Ways of Seeing*. Thus, he writes: "At the center of sexual experience, the object— because it is exclusively desired—is transformed and becomes universal."[30] The relatively few "satisfactory" European paintings of nudes, Berger has claimed earlier, show an individual, and so perhaps make it possible for an observer to feel such a desire. The less effective nudes reduce women to types, as if anyone with a certain appearance is enough to arouse the (male) viewer's desire.

But have we only just learned that this is how desire functions? Commenting on Mozart's *Don Giovanni,* Kierkegaard wrote:

> The first stage desired the one ideally, the second stage desired the particular under the qualification of the manifold; the third stage is a synthesis of these two. Desire has its absolute object in the particular, it desires the particular absolutely.[31]

It is precisely, I have tried to suggest, because such a presentation of desire is so powerful that we need to try to keep—as long as we remain in the realm of art, not "life"—aesthetic distance. Interpreting that last phrase quite literally, Kierkegaard's suggestion that he can better understand the music when he is not too physically close to it is suggestive:

> I have sat close up, I have sat further and further back…the farther I was away from it, not from coldness, but from love (the better I understand it). [ibid.]

Of course, being nostalgic for art of earlier times which achieved such a distance in ways perhaps unavailable to us today will not solve the problems to which Berger calls attention. And he, unlike Lord Clark, is hardly the sort of person to be nostalgic about the past. But what we can learn from studying such earlier art, I have tried here to suggest, is how to amplify and in some ways modify Berger's account of the contemporary female nude.

Notes

1 For example, see Lisa Tickner's very interesting "The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists since 1970," *Art History* 1, 2, June 1978, 236. Rosetta Brooks' "Woman Visible: Women Invisible," *Studio International* 193, no. 3(1977):208-212, seems to draw on similar ideas.

2 Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: 1978), pp. 239-240.

3 *Ways of Seeing*, pp. 54-55.

4 *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, 141; also see 157.

5 *a* Quoted in E. H. Gombrich's "Botticelli's Mythologies: A Study in the Neo-Platonic Symbolism of his Circle," in his *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London: 1972), pp. 44-45.
   b These two ways of seeing the picture are interestingly related in Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: Avon. 1980), p. 181.

6 The standard discussions here are Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy 1450-1600* (London: 1962), and Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory* (New York: 1968).

7 *Ways of Seeing*, p. 62.

8 Quoted from *Cosmopolitan*, October 1975:205.

9 Honey Truewoman (!), "Realism in Drag," reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Super Realism* (New York: 1975), p. 229.

10 Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography* (Baltimore: 1969), p. 101.

11 E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton: 1961), Chap. 5.

12 See Edgar Wind, "Charity: The Case History of a Pattern,"
The Journal of the Warburg Institute 1 (1937-1938):322-330.

13 See Charles Mitchell, "Benjamin West's 'Death of General Wolfe'
and the Popular History Piece," *The Journal of the Warburg
and Courtauld Institutes* 7(1944):20-33.

14 See Jean Seznec, " 'The Romans of the Decadence' and
Their Historical Significance," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* XXIV
(1943):221.

15 Kenneth Clark, *The Nude* (Garden City, N.Y.:1956). p. 109.

16 The title essay in his *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (London:
1965), pp. 1-11.

17 Interestingly discussed in Anne Coffin Hanson, *Manet and the
Modern Tradition* (New Haven and London: 1977).

18 See Robert Rosenblum, *Ingres* (New York, n.d.), pp. 98-99.

19 See Gombrich's "Raphael's 'Madonna della Sedia,' " in his
Norm and Form (London: 1966), pp. 64-80.

20 Theodore Hetzer, "Francisco Goya and the Crisis in Art around
1800," reprinted in Fred Licht, ed., *Goya in Perspective* (Englewood
Cliffs, N.J.:1973), p. 99.

21 These examples discussed in Theodore Reff, *Degas: The Artist's
Mind* (New York: 1976), pp. 52-53 and 92-93.

22 John Berger, "Nude in a Fur Coat, *Rubens*" (1966), *The Moment
of Cubism* (London: 1969), pp. 72-74; see also *Ways of Seeing*,
pp. 60-61.

23 In his *Meditations on a Hobby Horse,* p. 36.

24 In "Art and Freud's Displacement of Aesthetics," in Jonathan
Miller, ed., *Freud* (Boston: 1972), p. 133.

25 A comment made in a discussion with David Sylvester and
Andrew Forge, "A Kind of Informality," *Studio International*
171 (1966):55. See also Philip Rawson, *Drawing* (London: 1969),
p. 266.

26 London, 1971; quotations from pp. 98, 31.

27 This subject is treated more generally in a number of essays
in Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin, eds., *Woman as Sex
Object* (New York: 1972), and in a fascinating polemical article
by Carol Duncan, "The Esthetics of Power in Modern Erotic
Art," *Heresies* 1(1977):46-50.

28 Here the interpretation of Freud in his "Freud's Aesthetics,"
Encounter XXXVI, no. 1 (1966):30-40, and the essays now
collected in his *Ideals and Idols* (Oxford: 1979) are helpful.

29 Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: A Personal View* (New York: 1969),
p. 133.

30 Berger, G. (New York: 1972), p. 111.

31 Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or,* vol. 1 (Garden City, N.Y.: 1959),
pp. 83, 119. Thanks to a letter from John Berger to Mark
Roskill, I can now add that he, Berger, explicitly had this text
in mind while composing *G.*

Frank D. Russell.   Picasso's Guernica: The Laby-
rinth of Narrative and Vision. Montclair, N.J.:
Allanheld & Schram, 1980. 334 pp., 215 illus-
trations. $35.00.

Review Essay by Rudolf Arnheim
University of Michigan

One would be hard put to find another painting in the
history of art that has been analyzed in such detail and
by so many writers as Picasso's mural *Guernica.* Its
content, meaning, evolution, and derivation have been
scrutinized, and the end is not in sight. Professor
Russell's recent book is the most comprehensive
monograph so far. Where his forerunners have a
remark, he has a chapter; and he can be said to be
summing up what is left of earlier research. The path
of more than 40 years of *Guernica* studies is strewn
with the remains of attempts to meet the challenge of
this enigmatic work of art. Those of us who survive
have no reason to complain of being neglected by
Mr. Russell. He spends thirty-seven pages of Notes in
small print on quoting and critically discussing earlier
interpretations.

But the work continues. The best essay I have ever
read on *Guernica* was published by Reinhold Hohl
(1978) in Germany. In our own country Mary Mathews
Gedo (1979), in an article in *Art Quarterly* and now
in a book (1980, which I have not yet seen), offers a
psychoanalytic interpretation of the painting's subject
matter. Still another book on the preliminary sketches
and the "postscripts" is announced by Meyer Schapiro
(1981); and were it not for the name of an author who
has never failed to surprise us with new insights, one
would wonder what is left to say on the subject.

One reason for this continued interest is the fact that
Guernica is uncontested as the most significant paint-
ing of our century, mostly because of the way it deals
with one of those historical episodes in which public
opinion finds a passion-arousing symbol of the human
experience. Nobody has yet analyzed the particular
qualities that raise an event above the daily chronicles
of heroism, suffering, and violence. Sometimes it is the
mere size of a crime, as in the mass murder of the Jews
under Hitler. Sometimes it is, on the contrary, the limited
number of the victims, which allows for individual
identification, as in the case of the American hostages
in Iran and the paradigmatic nature of the outrage
committed. The bombing of the small Spanish town of
Guernica in 1937 shook the conscience of Europe as
the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755 had moved thinkers
of that time to question the wisdom of God. The strike
of the Fascists at the traditional sanctuary of civic free-