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Ways Of Seeing (Penguin Modern Classics)



Synopsis

How do we see the world around us? The Penguin on Design series includes the works of creative thinkers whose writings on art, design and the media have changed our vision forever. "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak." "But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but word can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled." John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* is one of the most stimulating and influential books on art in any language. First published in 1972, it was based on the BBC television series about which the (London) Sunday Times critic commented: "This is an eye-opener in more ways than one: by concentrating on how we look at paintings . . . he will almost certainly change the way you look at pictures." By now he has.

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Customer Reviews

thirty years on, 'Ways of Seeing' continues to be a major primary textbook, not just for those studying or interested in fine art, but in any of the humanities from literature to cinema. You can see the appeal for lecturers - difficult but essential theorists such as Benjamin and Barthes are explained

with bite-size lucidity, even if this sometimes has the effect of caricaturing their work. As Geoff Dyer has noted, much of the impetus given to Cultural Studies, the critical/academic form of post-modernism, can be traced to Berger's TV series and this book: many of the questions raised and areas for study pinpointed have generated a whole academic industry. In seven chapters, Berger assaults the traditional bastions of art 'appreciation', with its obfuscating jargon, elitist interests and, most damagingly, its insistence on timeless, non-'historical' values. Three of these essays are text-free, image-based, and Berger claims all the essays can be read independently and in any order, as part of the process of 'deconstructing' the apparatus of art criticism that includes laying bare the mechanics, manipulations and limitations of his arguments, and undermining the very idea of coherent authorship by suggesting the name 'John Berger' signifies a five-piece collective. Contrary to Berger's claim, the image-essays can only be properly understood in connection with the textual ones. These are four now-classic pieces of critical iconoclasm. The first synthesises Benjamin's famous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', and discusses how art, and the culture it embodies, has lost its old rarefied authority in a demystifying age of image overload. Chapter three analyses the classic tradition of nude paintings, and the misogynistic/patriarchal worldview it upheld.

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