‘This comment has been flagged as spam’

_Ways of Seeing_ was first aired and published in 1972. I did not know about the work when I was a student but came across it when I started to teach in 1985. By that time, it already looked dated and showing the videos in class meant laughing at the quaint humor of Berger’s haircut. Until the invitation to contribute to this volume arrived, it might have been 20 years since I cracked the pages of _Ways of Seeing_, though as recently as three years ago, I listed it as a prerequisite for starting one of my classes, an _Introduction to Graduate Studies_. What I meant when I listed it was not so much that students had read Berger, as that they had been taught the _ideas_ that are in the series, either through actual source texts or through Berger’s précis.

When I was invited to contribute to this issue, of course like many of the contributors, I actually did revisit the text. I also wanted to watch the videos again so I searched online and discovered that the entire series had been patiently posted on YouTube in 2008 by ‘manwithaplan999’. Each episode is divided into 4 segments for a total of 16 postings. The first segment of the first episode had been accessed by 230,000 people when I first checked and 2,000 more when I looked a week or so later, which suggests that viewership continues at a steady rate. Comments continue to be added as well. In other words, this was not an upload that got a flurry of interest at the start and then faded into oblivion. Rather it is a resource that continues to serve a purpose. The first segment of the second episode had been watched by 770,000 when I first checked and the numbers a few weeks later were up to 790,000. The third and fourth episodes have smaller numbers of viewers (20–40,000) but similar patterns. Viewings of all episodes drop off after the first segment, perhaps reflecting the ways that people don’t always finish what they start. Since many of the viewers are using this for class assignments, it perhaps also confirms something that we already suspected: that many more of our students read/watch the beginnings of what we assign than those that make it to the end.

The number of comments are roughly proportional to the volume of spectators, with the largest number of comments on any one segment being just over 100 (2.1). Totaling all the segments together, there were more than 500 comments posted over 3 years. The comments reveal two different strains of use, both related to education. There are a substantial number of users who are presently students, and their comments by-and-large are thanks to manwithaplan999 for posting the videos because it made it easier for them to get their homework done. They say: ‘my uni only lets us watch the video in-house. this lets me watch it while im typing out my essay’ (3.1) or ‘Thankyou soooo much for putting this up! I needed to study this for my Art History essay’ (2.1). There’s another substantial group that reveals having watched the tape as students ‘back in the day’ (2.1) though they don’t indicate what is motivating then to watch again now. This group of comments is interestingly nostalgic in tone. They say ‘I loved this back in college’ (1.1). ‘Reading this book was a fundamental part of my education’ (1.1). It ‘(b) rings back memories of my Social Psychology course. Where
Did the Marxist revolution go? (1.1) There’s a split in this group between those who ‘remember these confusing and self righteous times’ (2.2) and those who think it ‘still feels radical’ (1.1) and ‘hasn’t aged at all in terms of message’ (1.1). However, not everyone watching has had access through school. One writes: ‘It is very hard for those of us not living in the affluent west to have a chance to see them otherwise.’

I was immediately drawn in by the viewer comments, perhaps because the top ones, posted just a week before I logged on, read ‘an appalling piece of illogical and left-wing drivel’ (1.1) ‘replete with ridiculous untruths and left-wing propaganda’, ‘the most absurd and poisonous book I have read in years’ (1.2). Of course, this made me want to know more. Was ‘johnbarleycorn’ alone in his condemnation or was this a popular perspective? Weeding out the technical suggestions (‘you should modify this file so that it can be viewed on mobile phones’ – 3.3), content clarifications (‘Do you know the title and the artist of the painting shown at 04:19?’ – 1.3), and questions about distribution (‘Can you buy the DVD? No. Why not? No idea. It is criminal that it is not available’ – 2.2), we’re left with several interesting clusters of comments and some extended debates.

For episode one, there is a discussion about what Berger actually means that resembles one that often happens when we teach Walter Benjamin’s essay. Viewers berate Berger for insensitivity to the masses and others correct these (mis)readings of his underlying bias. I’m not surprised that students can’t always tell whether Benjamin is mourning or celebrating the loss of the aura, but I have to say I was a little surprised to see this confusion persist into Berger’s much watered-down version of Benjamin’s (1969[1935]) dense essay.

I think the difficulty reading what Berger means is related to the privilege that oozes from the series even as Berger proclaims his Marxist perspective. Audience discomfort with the place from which Berger conducts his critique is manifested in the comments making fun of Berger’s Oxbridge accent, such as ‘I twought i taw a puwddy cat!’ and ‘Stwike him, Centuwion. Stwike him vewy wuffly!’ Viewers wonder whether ‘he might actually have a speech impediment’ until it’s pointed out that ‘There are some Britons who have a funny way of saying the letter “R”. It’s almost as if they’re lisping. It’s a very traditional educated British accent’ (2.4). But it’s also manifested in many viewers’ indifference to oil paintings; viewing of the videos drops off radically for the third episode. It seems to me that in the intervening years much of what Berger teaches has become common sense. One spectator quips, ‘Berger must have burst a node the first time he discovered the internet.’ And indeed, one has to wonder whether the mash-up generation really needs Berger to demystify oil paintings for them at all.

By far the most viewers watched episode two and the comments for this section have a unique fervor and depth of engagement that is not part of the comments on any other episode. The second segment of episode two has been flagged by YouTube as ‘inappropriate’ and age restricted; I had to certify that I was 18 or older before getting access. Much of the commentary
debates the validity of this viewing restriction. There are many comments that bypass Berger’s critique of the representation of women and comment directly on the representations themselves: ‘she is hot’ (2.4), ‘most women in paintings are fat with small boobs’ (2.1), or ‘these broads need a man!’ (2.4) Quite a few were moderated off the list or flagged as spam but there are many who respond to this misuse in more complex ways than ‘this proves beyond a doubt that you’re a sexist bigot’ (2.3) or ‘You’re obviously a complete moron’ (1.1). There’s actually quite a bit of sophisticated discussion that demonstrates that viewers have read well beyond Berger: Baudrillard, Mulvey, Foucault, Sontag, Kruger, Wollenstonecraft, Reage all turn up. The wide-ranging discussion touches on alternative readings for the bible, the experience of being watched, changing cultural norms for beauty, the meaning of the concept of patriarchy, power, social hierarchy, the function of clothing, rape, masculinity, femininity, pay inequality, military service, class, race, misogyny, narcissism, sexuality.

The depth and range of the discussion contradicts the pejorative expression ‘reduced to the level of YouTube comments’. Instead, it shows up the web at its best as a forum for discussion, a resource for knowledge, and an opportunity for activism in some of the same ways that Paolo Freire and Augusto Boal teach us that live communities can be. This went some way towards alleviating my own frustration at Berger’s lack of citation. I found it galling that in four hours’ theory repackaged for British prime time, the only theorists Berger thinks worth crediting are Walter Benjamin, Claude Levi-Straus, and Kenneth Clark. While reading, I raged on behalf of all the unacknowledged feminist theorists who contributed to the formation of Berger’s analysis.

And yet, in spite of their media and theory savviness, many still find Berger relevant. Praise far outweighs dismissal, including noting the contemporary relevance of some of the critiques, especially gender, advertising, capitalism. Although ‘polymath?’ says ‘never at any point does Berger come anywhere near to saying a single thing that did not occur to me independently by the age of twelve’ (1.3), many more think that ‘this is a really compelling piece of television’ (1.1) and they ‘love how this has aged and yet remains so visionary’ (1.1).

Possibly the most interesting thing I found in my YouTube review of the Ways of Seeing episodes (and certainly the greatest homage to Berger) was a re-edit video by ‘dudubadub’ that was uploaded in 2010 and contextualized ‘as a class project’. Ways of Seeing Ep. 5: War remixes Berger by selecting audio from across the four episodes to write a critique of the representation of the war. By combining photographs and news footage, including speeches by George W. Bush, dudubadub calls attention to the manipulation of images in the service of power in a contemporary visual sphere. It seems to me, watching Ways of Seeing Ep. 5: War that today’s students don’t need Berger but that they know how to use him.
Notes

1.1 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnfB-pUm3eI
1.2 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peO6NDtyn8bM
1.3 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vHrRvsXBoK
2.1 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2A1aB-Gdc
2.2 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aHSV7ljusCs
2.3 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1yciNEuAs
2.4 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNZNBSfC7w
3.1 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiNqoyfeQDQ
3.3 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXWUuQUCHF8

Reference


Laurie Beth Clark
Art Department
University of Wisconsin, Madison
[email: lbclark@wisc.edu]

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My ways of seeing Ways of Seeing are ubiquitous, pervasive, and at multiple remove from their origin point. That is to say, I was never assigned John Berger’s book as a student, though I tackled it on my own at some point. I’ve never taught it, though I often assumed that my grad students had been exposed to it earlier in their educations. When asked to create a lineage for my transmedia publishing initiatives, I always talk about Marshall McLuhan, Quintin Fiore and Jerome Agel’s The Medium is the Massage (1967), but only rarely mention WoS.

And yet, tasked with rethinking the 40th anniversary of its multiple birth – as video telecast, magazine articles, and print book – WoS now seems to me to have anticipated and informed a huge amount of my practice, whether I was aware of it or not. In terms of the transmedia approach that I have taken in multiple projects with the MIT Press, ranging from pamphlets to books to websites to apps, WoS was there decades before. The multi-pronged reading strategy – text, pull quote, remixed image – in the Dj Spooky-authored, COMA-designed Rhythm Science (2004): WoS lays claim to essays composed entirely of images. In shaping Bruce Sterling’s Shaping Things (2005), designer Lorraine Wild and I referenced early 20th-century instructional pamphlets when she decided to use text from the first page as the cover image, somehow eliding the fact that Richard Hollis did just that on WoS. The choice to grant substantial authorial credits to designers in USER (2005) and Digital_Humanities (2012)? The second page of WoS reads in its entirety: ‘A book made by John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, Richard Hollis’.