

***Gazed and Confused***  
**An Exhibition in Two Parts**  
**Exhibition Text by Leila Peacock**

Chapter 2: 18.03.22 – 07.05.22

Opening: 18.03.22 from 18:00

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I to Eye: Some thoughts on looking.

"I hope you will consider what I arrange, but be skeptical of it". So ends the first episode of *Ways of Seeing*, the BBC's radical series on art first broadcast in 1972 and presented by a lustrous-haired young Berger in a rather questionable shirt. Radical because it sought to expose the hidden ideologies in visual imagery before Cultural Studies was even a real subject. Radical because it wanted to challenge the authoritative history of art with new terms and concepts, but also because it asked its viewers to rethink the very ways we look at looking.

*The boys watch the girls while the girls watch the boys who watch the girls go by.*

In the second episode Berger introduced the, then novel, idea of the 'male gaze' which he applies both to the history of Western painting and the popular image culture of the 70s. He identifies the dynamic whereby "men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at" and how this has invariably damaged female subjectivity to the point that a woman is "almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself". A dynamic that could be applied to any configuration of looker and looked-at. Now each of us has the opportunity to occupy both sides of this dynamic, as a culture we have become a confusing mix of both salacious and self-aware.

*Can't take my eyes off of you*

In the lexicon of looking 'the gaze' is a slippery verbal attempt to capture something both obvious and elusive, bringing together a messy mix of conscious intentions and unconscious desires but also unconscious intentions and conscious desires as is the way with anything that derives its impetus from those murky psycho-sexual waters of the erotic. It raises uncomfortable questions around complicity, whose enjoying what and why, in the attempt to disentangle the mess of desire and power and exploitation that divides the gazers and the gazed-upon and those not seen at all. The word 'gaze' is of obliquely ancient origin, it is a word that is pleasurable to speak aloud, it slips between teeth and tongue with a suggestive buzz. No doubt this is onomatopoeically indivisible from the lascivious pleasure it implies: the pleasure of looking (scopophilia), of gazing upon a gorgeous thing, while also perhaps enjoying, the subjugation of the gazed upon. The gazed upon also deriving an uneasy self-affirmation as the passive object of desire.

*Do you see what I see?*

There are many ways of seeing, and there have been many ways to look at looking. The eye is not an obvious organ. Lucretius laid out a theory of atom-thin and lightning-fast images that stream from the surfaces of solid objects and enter the eyes. In this sense it is the eye that is penetrated by what it looks upon. How different from this 'gaze' that Berger speaks of where the eye almost licks the looked-at with lecherous non-consensual pleasure. In the 17th century with the advent of the study optics and the refinement of perspective drawing seeing was re-conceived. Descartes understood that the eye collects 'sense data' but it is the brain that processes that information into the images we see. Seeing and knowing were understood to be part of the same act, you know a thing because you see it, but you see it because you know it, which affects what and how you see it. This in turn gave an identity to looking, looking was defined by who was doing it, and what they saw was inevitably coloured by their own

epistemological and erotic inclinations.

*For your eyes only*

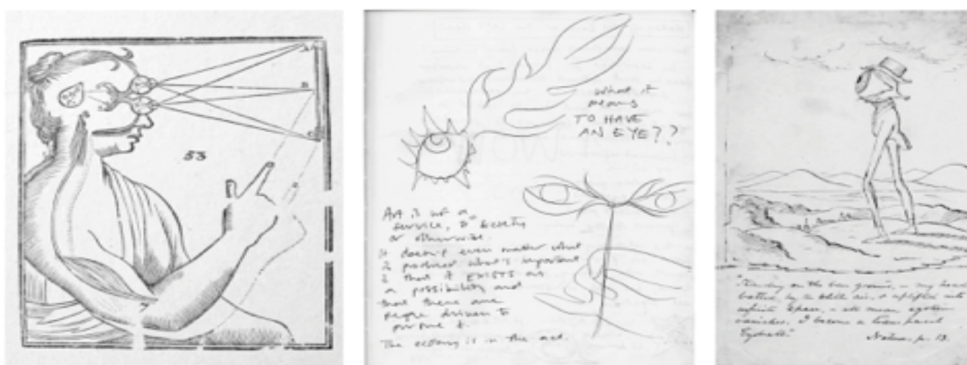
A painting, and all the forms of image-making that followed it, is an attempt to capture some fleeting image that we wish to render as an object. This is what made the camera so instantly compelling, it seemed to be the exact record of a lost moment, immolated into image. The effect was so uncanny when this technology first appeared that people displayed an unease in having their photo taken, fearing that some part of their soul would be stolen, or trapped on earth, wraith-like, when they died. Certainly there is sympathetic magic in the act of capturing a person's image. Sympathetic magic evident in many cultures of folk-belief, maintains someone can be magically affected by an object that represents them, for good or ill. It is no stretch of the imagination to acknowledge that the images that represent you have real world consequences for you. Who depicts a person and how, and with what level of consent and subsequent distribution and exposure, are questions that should be asked of any portrayal, because the image retains some occult residue of the subject depicted.

So we arrive at the myriad confusions of the current age. Where the potential digital proliferation of an image seems to be infinite. Where we are all photographed hundreds of times a day, with and without consent. The role of voyeur is now played by the technology itself, in an artificial imitation of all our own worst tendencies. We expend energy trying to keep our faces off the internet, which itself represents a monstrous spectrum of face culture that runs from ultrasounds of the unborn, to self-designed swipable 'profiles' for all the many masks we wear, to revenge porn and finding fame through unwontedly becoming a meme - your face the punchline of a thousand poorly phrased LOLZ.

*I was looking back, to see if you were looking back at me, to see me looking back at you.*

Prisoner's who are subjected to solitary confinement talk not just about forgetting who they are, but about what it means to exist as a defined subject, because if no one looks at you for a long period of time your very sense of self seems to disintegrate into a state of what is called 'ontological insecurity'. We all carry an image of ourselves in our head that we see reflected in how others look at us, and it makes us coherent to ourselves. One could argue that this will-to-be-seen is being turned inside out on the internet, where we begin to feel a sense of ontological insecurity by being seen too much, turning us into a schizophrenic multitude of possible versions of ourselves.

In an essay, *Towards A Small Theory of the Visible*, written many decades after *Ways of Seeing*, Berger returns to the subject of painting. He quotes the seventeenth-century Chinese landscape painter Shitao who wrote "the brush is for saving things from chaos", the conscious act of depiction can offer a stabilisation, a brief redemption from the flux. Berger writes "every painted image announces: I have seen this... painting is an affirmation of the visible which surrounds us and which continually appears and disappears". We are by nature scopophiles, schaulust runs deep through us all, it is the reason for art's very existence. May we find refuge here from the virtual image and return to the simpler fetishistic pleasures of the brush, the camera and the book.



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