



Ways of Seeing

by [Kat Avila](#)

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Publisher

Penguin Group

Credits

Author: John Berger

ISBN: 0-14-013515-4

Illustrator:

Grade: 10

*NOTE: This review is more a digressive contemplation since I read **Ways of Seeing** to help me become a better comics reviewer. Also, John Berger's writings provoked much musing about yaoi manga.*

John Berger's revolutionary **Ways of Seeing** was first published in 1972. When I found it in my father's library, I thought perhaps it had been required reading for him in one of his college classes, as it is still for many students. The advertisements used in the last essay, which also compose part of the wallpaper on the back cover, give the book a dated look, but **Ways of Seeing** is still provocative and relevant for what it says about the concealed and subliminal function of European oil paintings (mid-1400s up to 1900s) and how the same human drives and needs reflected in those paintings recycle themselves in commercial advertising.

The book is based on a TV series that aired on BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation). Though only John Berger's name is on the cover and title page, five people were involved in its

creation. The others were Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, and Richard Hollis.

There are seven essays altogether. Three of the essays are wordless parades of photographs, paintings, and/or advertisements that tease out more thoughts between the plainly written essays. The book's visual examples are reproduced in black-and-white only, so it was somewhat startling to later view the included oil paintings in color (see [this page](#)).

"The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled." (p. 7)

There will always be this tension. Berger refers to the gap between sight and words. Yet, what is sighted is not solely connected to written knowledge but to other images.

Take for example, if you've never been to the youthful shopping mecca Shibuya (in Tokyo), often visited by characters in *shoujo* (girls) manga, then peripheral meanings and associations with the establishing shots will be lost. The panels become meaningful in proportion to your experience of the idea of "Shibuya": knowledge of Japanese culture and geography, the city itself, a certain corner.

Seeing an image of Shibuya retrieves from within a set of memories not represented in the panels but standing outside them, even as it informs the panels. My eye checks off landmarks and situates the manga characters in a specific place, permitting a deeper reading, whereas another reader may dismiss those same structures as generic.

"Every image embodies a way of seeing." (p. 10)

This statement summarizes the key point of **Ways of Seeing**. If you understand for what purpose an image was created, then you are on your way toward developing insights as to its communicative "behavior," establishing first your position relative to the image, e.g., critic, fan, consumer, liberal, female, etc., in order to account for

differences in interpretation.

For the commercial manga creator, the interests of the spectator-reader are a major consideration; the most obvious proof of this is fan service. The created images are funneled to the spectator-reader in an adapted visual and textual language; think of the dialogue balloons, exaggerated facial expressions, written sound effects, and special visual symbols such as a gushing nosebleed or a single giant drop of sweat.

But as Berger points out in parallel, even an image such as, for our discussion purposes, a mini-skirted schoolgirl is drawn guided by a way of seeing, the reader—male or female, straight or gay—will bring to the table his/her own way of seeing which affects how it is received.

"It ['The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and St. John the Baptist'] has become impressive, mysterious, because of its market value." (p. 23)

John Berger was talking about a relatively unknown drawing by Leonardo da Vinci that suddenly became elevated because a collector laid down a fortune to possess it. This made me think of original drawings and sketches by manga creators and the high prices they can fetch at auctions, sometimes reaching into thousands of dollars. Suddenly, I'm at a convention gallery featuring their work, impressed not by the art or compositions but by the asking price for each piece.

"It is hard to define exactly how the words have changed the image but undoubtedly they have. The image now illustrates the sentence." (p. 28)

Berger is referring to Vincent van Gogh's painting "Wheatfield with Crows" and how a simple statement following it completely reframes the way you view the painting. The incredible power of words. Still, a successful comic is not one where the drawings are merely illustrative.

Hold up an apple among people who don't speak the same

language. We all can identify it as an apple. Now try to communicate the idea of "apple" without drawing. Despite their powerfulness, words do have limitations.

*"In his book on **The Nude** Kenneth Clark maintains that to be naked is simply to be without clothes, whereas the nude is a form of art." (p. 53)*

Yaoi is addressed to the female spectator in the same fashion as a certain tradition of European oil paintings is addressed to the male. So, in yaoi, I'm not simply looking at naked men, but a form of nude. The fantasy guys are like stage actors asked to cheat a little to the left or right so the audience can fully appreciate their facial expressions—and bodies. Especially the bottom, he is not just presenting himself to be surveyed by his partner but by the spectator-reader.

Yaoi is the objectification of men, but not so much gay men as straight men, because the targeted spectator-reader is a straight woman whose desire can only be reciprocated by a straight man, which is why frequently men in yaoi are bisexual and not truly gay. How many times has a bottom protested, "But I'm not gay!"

Because yaoi guys don't actually exist, that makes it fantasy, drawings being more nonspecific than photographs. Make a movie of Youka Nitta's hard-core romance **Embracing Love** with actual men, and I'm immediately excluded from participating in Katou and Iwaki-san's relationship, because when it gets too real (and the sentimental romance gets cut) the master viewer changes from straight female to gay male. With fantasy guys, the body isn't concrete and impassable; the body contour is fluid.

When the image gets too specific, the ownership of the image is restricted to fewer people. Berger gives the example of Rubens' painting of his second wife who is partially naked. Our eyes take her in with all her imperfections. She is not a fantasy girl or a generic pin-up; she is a specific woman who "belongs" to a specific man.

"Transform the woman into a man." (p. 64)

Berger is talking about doing an experiment with the images in the book. Do that to a yaoi manga. Transform the bottom into a woman and you end up with something not much different from images in a heterosexual romance. What additionally unveils itself is the realization that the yaoi spectator-reader is given a perspective not available to her while reading a heterosexual romance. Power relations have changed; that which is surveyed is the male body.

The success of John Berger et al's ***Ways of Seeing*** lies in making us take a second look at images in society at large and the ones we surround ourselves with for what it says about what we covet. If you've taken a communications media class, you may have read similar themed books, but ***Ways of Seeing*** was the book that stimulated much of the scholarship. If you've ever heard someone muttering about rich man's pornography while gazing at classic paintings in an art museum, he/she has probably read this book.

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