WAYS OF SEEING: CHAPTER 3, THE NUDE

The social presence of men and women

Berger points out that traditionally, men and women have different types of social presence. Men are measured by the degree of power they offer. The power may be in any number of forms, for example moral, physical, economic etc. A man’s presence suggests what he may or may not be able to do to or for you. In contrast to this, a woman’s presence indicates what can or cannot be done to her. Every thing she does contributes to her presence. She is born into the keeping of men, and from childhood is taught to survey herself, with the result that her being is split into two, the surveyed and the surveyor. Her own sense of being is replaced by a sense of being appreciated by others – ultimately men. He acts, she appears, and she watches herself being looked at. ‘The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.’ (p. 47).

The nude in oil painting

Berger points out that women are the main subject in one category of European oil painting – the nude. The nude reveals how women have been seen and judged as sights. The first nudes in this tradition illustrate the story of Adam and Eve, usually as a series of images similar to a cartoon. For Berger, there are two important elements to this story. Firstly, having eaten the apple they see each other in a different way, so nakedness was in the eye of the beholder. Secondly, the woman is blamed and made subservient to the man by way of punishment.

During the Renaissance the story disappeared, and instead a single moment was shown, usually the moment of shame. However, the shame is directed more at the viewer than towards each other. Gradually, the shame became a kind of display. Even when secular subjects began to be used, the implication that the woman was aware of being seen by the spectator remained. As a result she was not naked in her own right but naked as the (male) viewer saw her.

Berger gives a range of examples. Nudes looking at the viewer looking at them; of women looking in mirrors joining in the spectacle of themselves; or of looking into mirrors and being accused of vanity, when in reality they are only satisfying men’s desire to see them naked; and of women’s beauty being judged. Common to all of these images is the sense of the woman being watched; by men in the painting; by herself; by the spectator towards whom her body is often turned.
Often, she looks at the spectator looking at her. Her nakedness is not an expression of her own feelings but that of the male viewer. This is in marked contrast to the art of other cultures where nakedness is not so passive and has a degree of sexual equality.

At the time Berger produced *Ways of Seeing*, the most authoritative study of the nude was Kenneth Clark’s *The Nude*. Clark distinguishes between nakedness and nudity. For him, to be naked is simply to be without clothes. It has nothing to do with art. The nude, on the other hand, is an art form. The subject may be naked people, but the way they are painted makes them nudes, i.e. a way of seeing. [Berger does not make it clear, but Clark’s main concern was to deny the sexuality of the nude.]

Berger develops this distinction. ‘To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude.’

In the average oil painting of the nude, the main character is never painted; this is the male spectator for whom everything has been done. Berger illustrates this point with the *Allegory of Time and Love* by Bronzino. In the painting, Cupid is kissing Venus, yet the way their bodies are arranged have nothing to do with them kissing. Her body has been contorted to present itself to the male viewer of the painting. The picture appeals to his sexuality, it has nothing to do with hers. The image conforms to another European convention, that of not painting body hair on women. This is because hair suggests power and passion, and the male spectator must feel these are his characteristics.

There are exceptions to the tradition, and Berger points out the characteristics paintings need, to be ‘. . .paintings of loved women, more or less naked’ (p. 57), rather than nudes. They need to transcend the moment, because for Berger, in a lived sexual experience, nakedness is a process rather than a state, so an image of any instant runs the risk of distortion. The images must be subjective, and finally they must have an element of banality (ordinariness).

European humanism, which entails a strong sense of the individual, was a strong influence on European thinking during this time, yet the nude denied the individualism of the women portrayed. The reason for this was the contradictory interests of those involved in a painting: the patron, the artist and the model. Dürer, for example, believed the ideal nude ought to be constructed out of the parts of various bodies, so denying any sense of the individual at all. The spirit of individualism allowed some artists to resolve this contradiction, but the tradition as a whole did not.
Despite the notion of the ideal nude being broken by Manet’s Olympia, and replaced by the realism of the prostitute, the unequal relationship exploited by oil painting is still deeply embedded in our culture and shapes the thinking of many women. Today, the attitudes that created the nude can be seen in the mass media, and ‘...the essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed’ (p. 64). The ideal spectator is still male and the image is designed to flatter him.

WAYS OF SEEING: CHAPTER 7, PUBLICITY

The effect of publicity images

For Berger, the term ‘publicity images’ has the same meaning as ‘advertising images’. He points out that they surround us, and that this is unique to modern society. These visual messages last only for a moment, both in terms of how long we look at them and in terms of how frequently they need to be updated. Despite this, they do not refer to the present but to the future.

We see these images so frequently we now take them for granted. Although we usually pass these images, we have the sense of them continually passing us, so they are seen as dynamic and we seem static.

These images are justified in terms of an economic system that, in theory, benefits the public (the consumer), by stimulating consumption and as a result, the economy. Although tied to the concept of free choice, the freedom to buy this brand or another, the whole system of publicity is based on one proposal: that we can change our lives for the better if we buy something. Despite having spent our money, our lives will be richer by possessing more.

Envy, glamour and publicity

Berger sees a relationship between envy, glamour and publicity. Publicity shows us people whose lives have been transformed by consumption and so have become enviable. Being enviable makes the person glamorous, and publicity manufactures glamour.

Publicity starts by working on the natural appetite for pleasure, something that is real. It does not, however, offer the pleasure as it is. Rather it promises happiness, happiness gained by being envied by others, and this is glamour. It is not therefore offering the pleasure in itself. The better the publicity, the more the spectator is aware of what they are missing. Yet this glamour is very solitary.