

3. John Berger

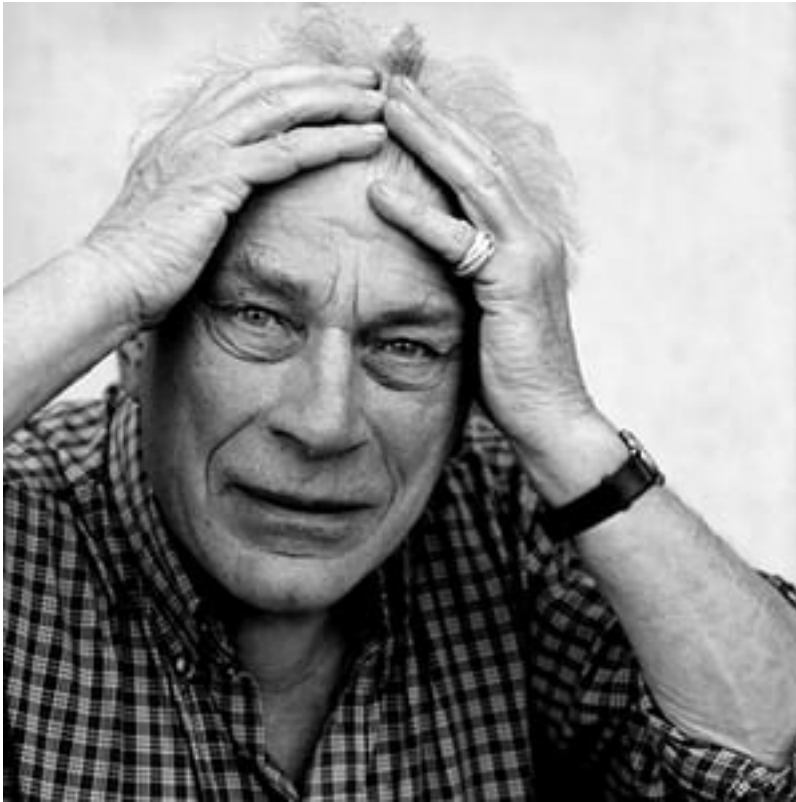
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John Berger (1926-2017)



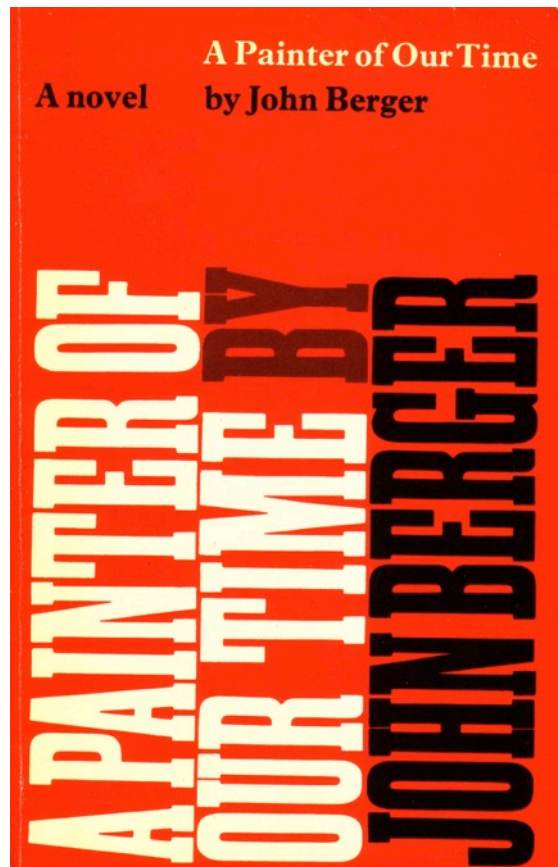
- b. London 1926, Studied at Central and Chelsea School of Art and began life as a painter.
- Then began writing art criticism for Tribune and The New Statesman, The Observer, The Sunday Times, The Daily Worker, Labour Monthly and Marxism Today.
- His fiction includes ‘Permanent Red’ (1960), “A Painter of our Times” (1958), The Foot of Clive” (1962), “Corker’s Freedom” (1964); and “Art and Revolution” (1969).
- His Novel “G” won the prestigious Booker Prize, and with half the prize money (he shared it with the Black Panther organisation) he moved to Quincy (rural France in Haute-Savoie), where he lived for 50 years, and worked on several photo-essay books with photographer **Jean Mohr**, documenting the lives of his rural neighbours.”A Fortunate Man” (1967), and “A Seventh Man” (1975)

“Ways of Seeing” (1972)



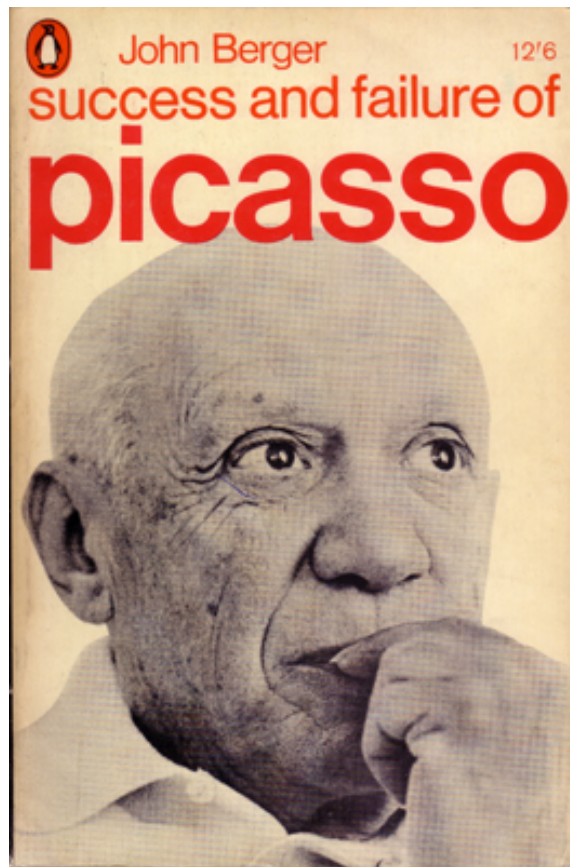
- He is perhaps best known for his four-part television series, ‘**Ways of Seeing**’, first broadcast in 1972,
- Berger takes up **Walter Benjamin’s** ideas of interpreting objects to reveal their social/material relationships, in the age of mechanical reproduction.
- Explores the sociology of looking, through painting, gender, social life - revealing the power imbalances in art and everyday life.

“A Painter of our Time” (1958)



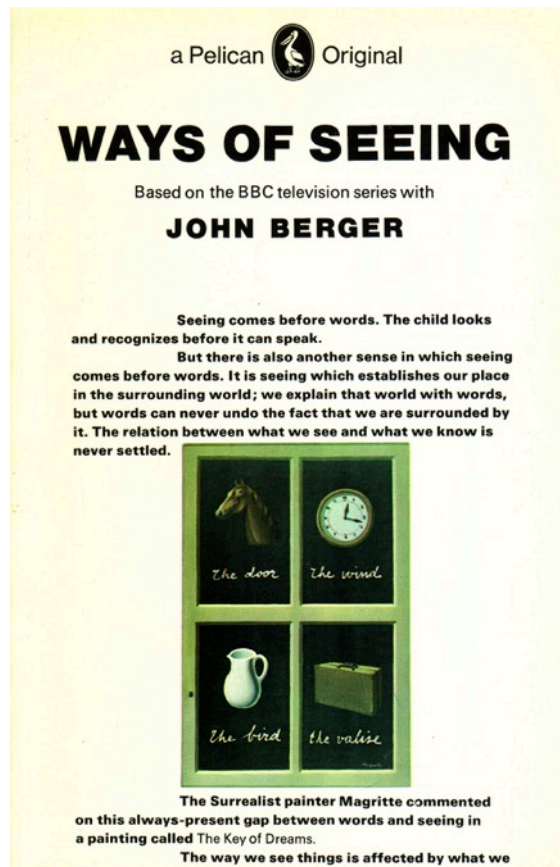
- In 1958, Berger published his first novel, “A Painter of Our Time”, which tells the story of the disappearance of Janos Lavin, a fictional exiled Hungarian painter, (loosely modeled on the UK artist Peter De Francia), and his diary's discovery by an art critic friend called John.
- The key theme of the book is to ask, “What is the artist’s place in Western society? What relation can there be between art and politics, particularly revolutionary politics?” And what is an artist’s primary duty at times of revolutionary crisis - to his politics or to his art?
- The work was withdrawn by the publisher under pressure from the **Congress for Cultural Freedom** (a CIA-funded anti-communist organisation, based in Paris during The Cold War), a month after its publication.
- His next novels were “The Foot of Clive” and “Corker’s Freedom”; both of which presented an urban English life of alienation and melancholy.
- Berger moved to Quincy in the Haute-Savoie, France in 1962 due to his distaste for life in Britain. He lived there for over 50 years until his death in 2017.

“Success and Failure of Picasso” (1965)



- Sets out to explore the reality of Picasso’s achievement behind the media hype and outrage generated by stylistic ‘distortions’ and art world inflated prices.
- Investigates every period of Picasso’s life and work, from the early ‘Blue period’, through Cubism and the compositions that culminated in “Guernica” (1937), up to the 1960s.
- In doing so, Berger highlights the role of the artist in the 20th-century and his/her relationship to Western capitalist social organisation.
- Berger is as clear in his praise for Picasso when his work was experimental, questioning, outgoing, or politically engaged, as he is critical of the artist when the work becomes introspective, repetitive and less socially engaged.
- When Picasso moved away from social engagement, (after the Blue Period in 1917 and apart from “Guernica” in 1937), for Berger, he loses the moral energy to drive his work beyond aesthetic introspection.
- He sees Picasso as ‘trapped’ by his own ‘Midas touch’ - anything that he did could be sold for such vast sums, that it was virtually impossible to remain critical about what he did, or even to know how to choose what to paint.
- If everything one does is deemed valuable - how is one to make choices?

Ways of Seeing (1972)



- Broadcast by the BBC in 1972 as a four-part television series
- An introduction to the study of images. The work was derived in part from **Walter Benjamin's** essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction".
- **The opening section** deals with the relation of words to images; how we prioritise the verbal over the visual, when in fact the visual precedes speech. Berger explores painting's relation to place, to the discourse which grows up around it and attempts to 'explain' it, and the modern impact of photography and reproducibility on formerly unique images.
- **Sections 2 and 3** deal with the gendered gaze, the power of men and the objectification of women, explored through depictions of female bodies in Western art. In these depictions, from the Renaissance to Rubens, Rembrandt, and Manet, generally speaking, it is the men who act/gaze and the women who are observed.
- **Sections 4 and 5** deal with the social and historical context of artworks as revealed in the approaches the artist takes to what they depict - property, poverty, class relations etc.

“Ways of Seeing” (1972)



Thomas Gainsborough, “Mr and Mrs Andrews” (c.1750),
London, National Portrait Gallery

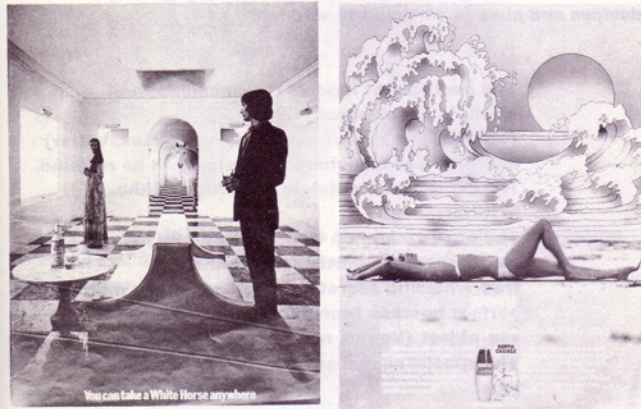
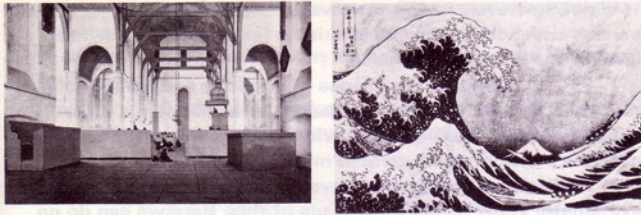
- The first pure landscapes, painted in Holland in the 17th-century, answered no direct social need. They were done for pleasure or decoration, as a relatively independent activity, which in turn encouraged an experimental pictorial attitude.
- By the 1750s, following the expansion of trade, wealthy landowners in England were able to amass huge fortunes and build stately homes, full of paintings and antiques acquired on the ‘Grand Tour’.
- They were able, like Mr and Mrs Andrews, able to commission **Thomas Gainsborough**, one of the most fashionable (and expensive) artists from the Royal Academy, to depict themselves, as proud landowners, seated in front of their considerable estate.
- **Sir Lawrence Gowing** and John Berger had a rather heated debate about this painting; Gowing defending the subject as concerning merely the innocent and purely philosophical contemplation of Nature; Berger saying it was disingenuous to ignore the aspect of Capital and class celebrated in the painting, and that ‘Nature’ was also a social construct.

“Ways of Seeing” (1972)



- The last **sections, 6 and 7**, deal with the relation of advertising to art.
- The modern flood of images used for publicity means that we are surrounded by more images and their related slogans/texts than ever before.
- These images and texts bombard us with, often false, needs and drastically alter the context by which we understand other images such as paintings.
- Although advertisements compete with each other for our attention, their basic message is the same: that by consuming/buying a new product, we will transform ourselves into a better or more enviable state, and the only requirement is money.
- Envy is of course a solitary and alienated kind of emotion - it depends precisely upon you not sharing your experiences with those who envy you
- The illusion of consumption is based on the false premise that all the money in the world is equitably divided so that everyone has exactly the same purchasing power..
- We are ‘free’ to consume provide we have free and equal access to capital.
- Advertising transforms our everyday lives into one of perceived ‘lack’ - because we lack the means to endlessly consume, we are rendered melancholy. Only consumption, paradoxically, can ‘cure’ our melancholy

“Ways of Seeing” (1972)



- Advertising often uses works of art as the basis of its new message.
- Partly this is because those people who work in advertising often have backgrounds in fine art and art history and are familiar with cultural tradition
- But more importantly, culture is used in advertising to bestow authority, grandeur, ‘class’, dignity, even ‘wisdom’ to the product or service being sold.
- An oil painting belongs to our European heritage and its rarity and uniqueness mean that, historically, it has accumulated enormous monetary value, and is therefore exclusive and enviable.
- Advertising images also draw upon the forms and poses of their models to suggest the required stereotype: serene mother, perfect hostess, sex-object, material luxury, powerful man, virilky, and spatial or geographic suggestions of distance (mystery), idyllic nature (innocence) etc.
- Publicity is nostalgic; it sells you the future by alluding to the past. Its ‘credibility’ depends on you believing that the new will be as good as or better than the old.
- New technology like colour photography and digital manipulation make the range and type of publicity’s use of imagery all the more ‘convincing. By increasing the optical splendour of the advertised object, its apparent tactility, we are made more aware that we do not possess it.(yet).

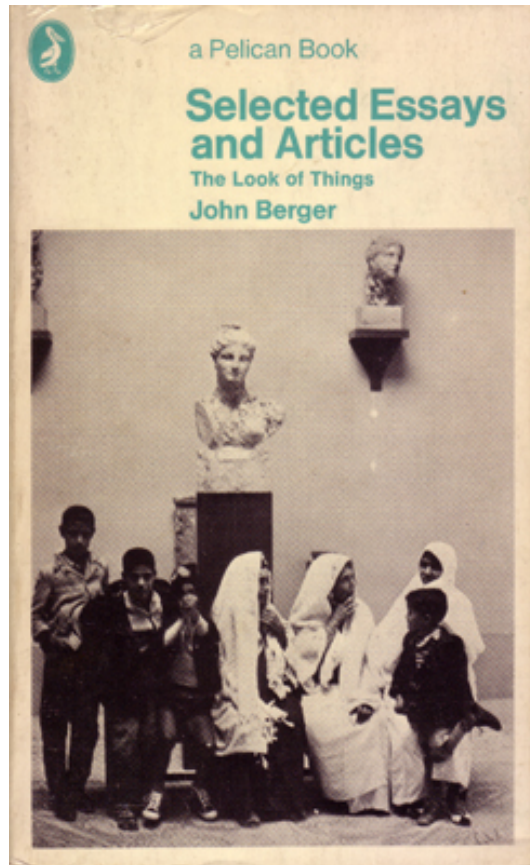
“Ways of Seeing” (1972)



Barbara Kruger, “I shop therefore I am”, (1989)

- Berger’s Conclusion:
- “Publicity, situated in a future continually deferred, excludes the present and so eliminates all becoming, all development. Experience is impossible within it. All that happens, happens outside it...It recognises nothing except the power to acquire. All other human faculties or needs are made satisfactory to this power, All hopes are gathered together, made homogeneous, simplified, so that they become the intense yet vague, magical yet repeatable promise offered in every purchase. No other kind of hope or satisfaction or pleasure can any longer be envisaged within the culture of capitalism.” (p.153)
- To be continued by the reader...

“Selected Essays and Articles: The Look of Things” (1972)



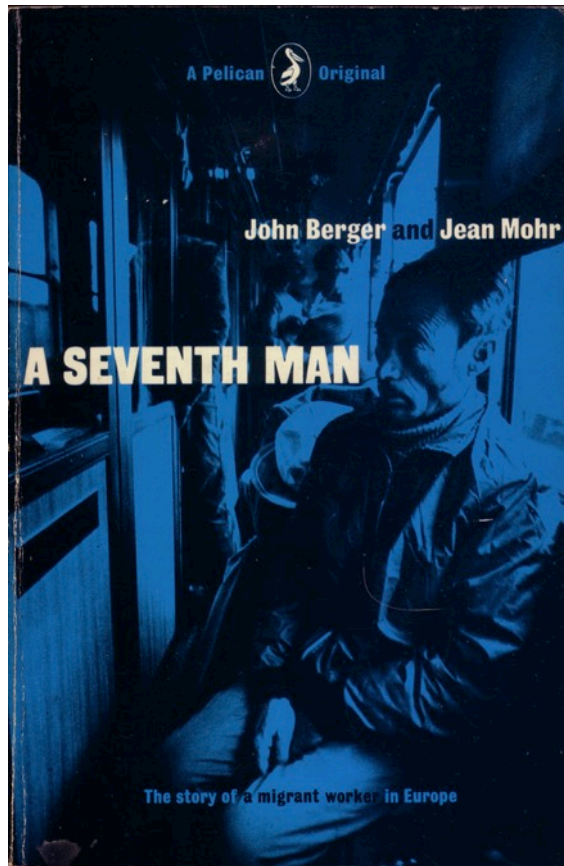
- Essays on travel, Che Guevara, Ossip Zadkine, Le Corbusier, Walter Benjamin, Watteau, Romantic notebooks, Léger, Cubism, understanding a photograph, the politics of photomontage and on the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia.
- The essays cover a broad time-frame, and represent a continuous perceptive/ critical set of observations on the contemporary world
- Draws on **Benjamin** and parallels some of **Roland Barthes'** musings in 'Mythologies'.(1957)
- Each essay is approached from a consistent humanistic, Marxian position which rejects fragmented analysis in order to synthesize human behaviour and experience.
- Represents a coherent development of his **idea of freedom** as expressed in specific situations, and his intolerance of injustice and inequality in the world. For Berger, freedom is specific to a specific situation, a work of art, a daily act, a political event, or the life of a person. To release this potential is to succeed; to deny, ignore or be frightened of it is to fail.
- Property, on the other hand, is always the denial of this potential in that it reduces the situation, the work of art, the life of a human being, into a single, non-dialectical, non-ambivalent entity, whose sole meaning rests in its possession.
- The essays in the book are all evidence of the success or failure to release the potential freedom contained in each situation.

Sociological works and photo essays



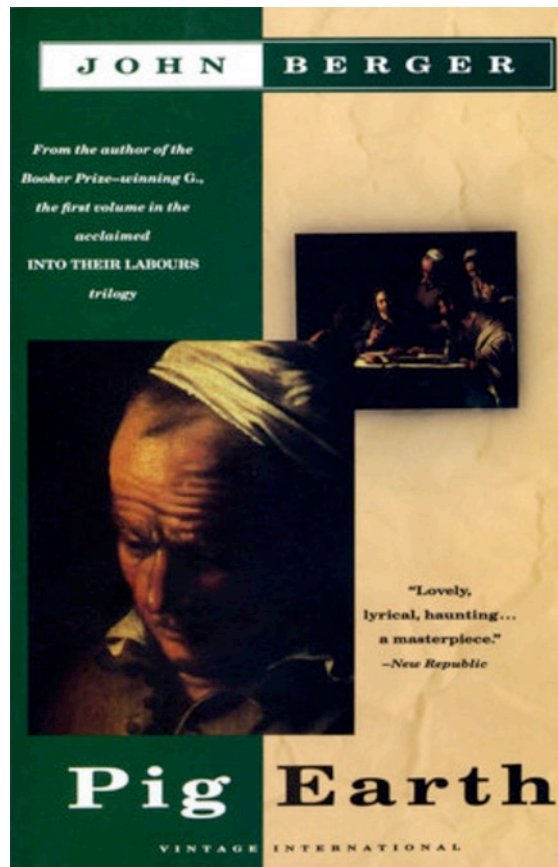
- Berger's sociological writings include "A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor" (1967) and "A Seventh Man: Migrant Workers in Europe" (1975).
- Berger and photographer **Jean Mohr**, his frequent collaborator, sought to document and understand the experiences of peasants.
- Their subsequent book, "Another Way of Telling", discusses and illustrates their documentary technique and treats the theory of photography through Berger's essays and Mohr's photographs.
- His studies of individual artists include "The Success and Failure of Picasso" (1965), and "Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny, Endurance, and the Role of the Artist in the USSR" (1969). Both of which balance the artists' individual vision with the larger socio-political context within which the work was created, and the related moral and ideological struggles each artist faced.

“A Seventh Man” with Jean Mohr (1975)



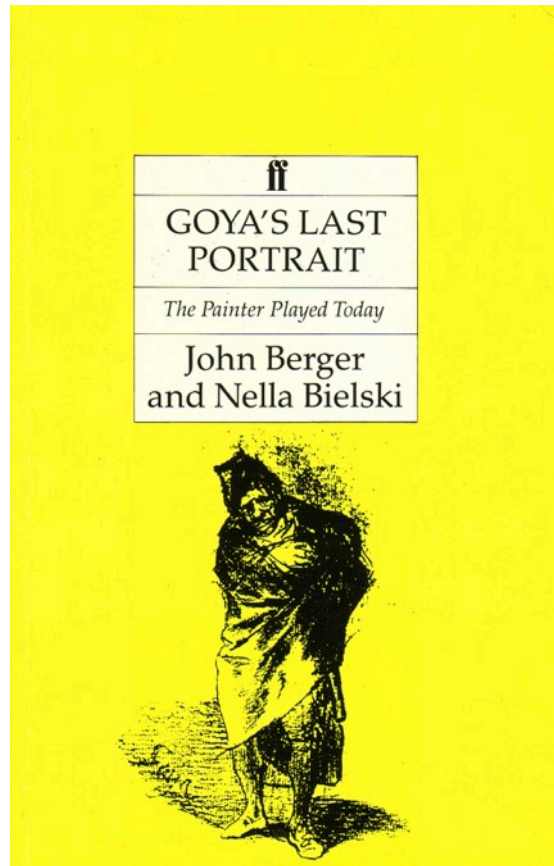
- Berger donated half the **Booker Prize** cash to the Black Panther Party in Britain, and retained half to support his work on the study on migrant workers that became “A Seventh Man”, asserting that both endeavors represented aspects of his political struggle.
- The book explores, through poetry, photography and critical analysis, the life experiences of some of the 22 million migrant workers in industrialised European countries.
- Today, the migrant worker experiences, within a few years, what the working population of every industrial city once experienced over generations - the move from the country to the town, the relativisation of values and the loosening of the sense of family and home, constant and accelerated change, and constant insecurity, obliging constant adaptation, a constantly changing work environment, constant incursions of new technology and an accompanying sense of fragmentation and isolation..
- For Berger, to consider the migrant worker’s life - its material circumstances and his inner feelings - is to be brought face to face with the fundamental nature of present societies and their histories.
- To Berger, the Migrant is not peripheral to modern experience: he is absolutely central to it.

“Their Labours Trilogy” (1980s)



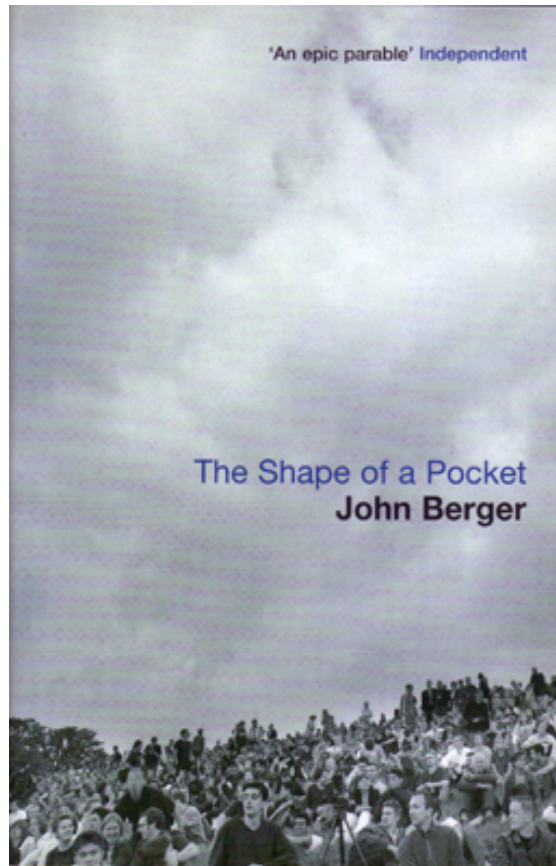
- In the 1970s, Berger collaborated on three films with the Swiss director Alain Tanner:
- He wrote or co-wrote “La Salamandre” (1971), “The Middle of the World” (1974), and “Jonah who will be 25 in the year 2000” (1976)
- His major fictional work of the 1980s, the trilogy “Into Their Labours” (consisting of the novels “Pig Earth”, “Once in Europa”, and “Lilac and Flag”), treats the European peasant experience from its farming roots to contemporary economic and political displacement and urban poverty. Set in a small village in the French Alps, “Pig Earth” relates the stories of skeptical, hard-working men and fiercely independent women; The sensuous description conveys the precise wealth and weight of a world that is disappearing.
- In 1974, Berger co-founded the **Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative Ltd** in London with Arnold Wesker, Lisa Appignanesi, Richard Appignanesi, Chris Searle, Glenn Thompson, Siân Williams, and others. The cooperative was active until the early 1980s.

Goya's Last Portrait (1989)



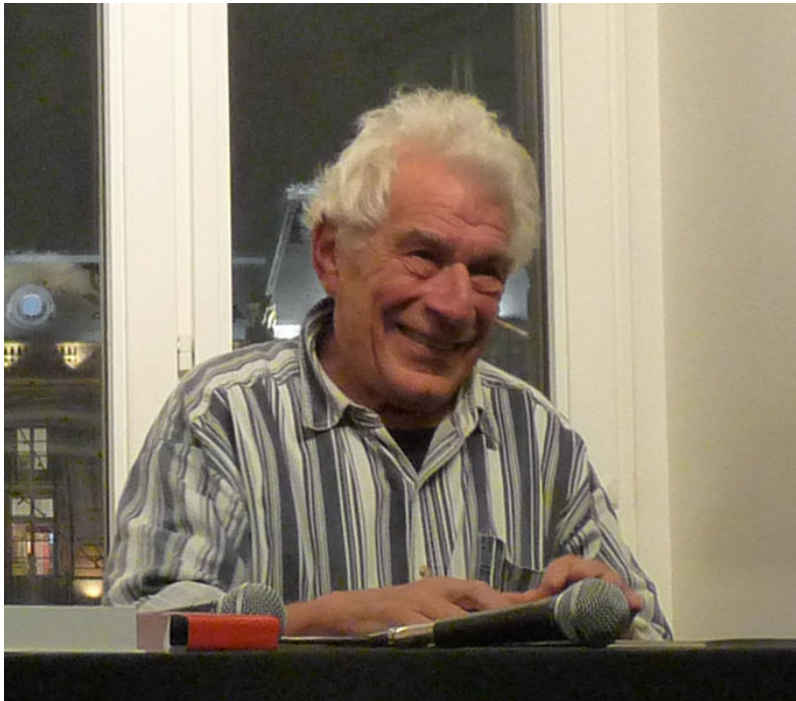
- Goya painted a series of Royal portraits throughout a time of turmoil and political upheaval, as well as a series of self portraits, etchings and drawings which remain a testament to their times
- Berger, with **Nella Bielski** drew upon elements of Goya's life and iconography, to make a dramatic portrait of the artist, responding to the theatricality and inventiveness of Goya's work, and transforming the artist into an artist for our time.

The Shape of a Pocket (2001)



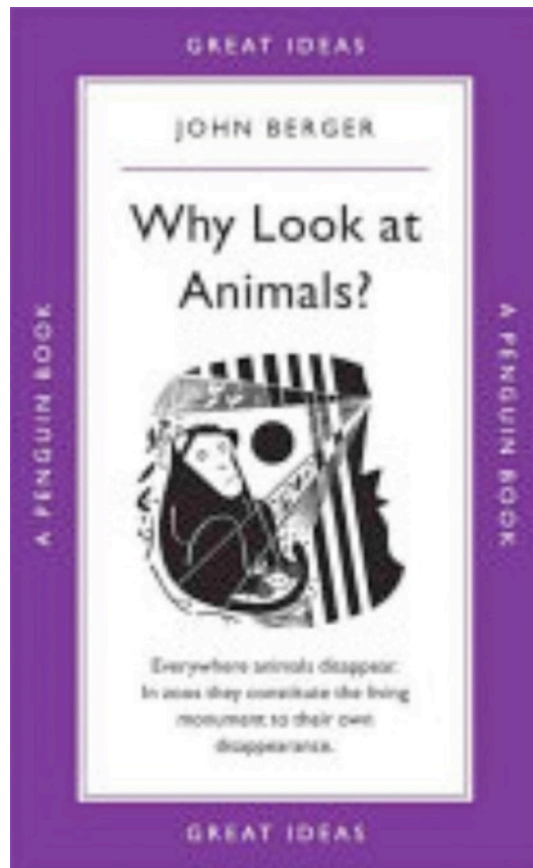
- “The ‘pocket’ in question is a small pocket of resistance. A pocket can be formed when two or more people come together in agreement. The resistance is against the inhumanity of the new economic order,
- The people coming together are the reader, me and those the essays are about: Rembrandt, Paleolithic cave painters, a Romanian peasant, ancient Egyptians, and expert in the loneliness of certain hotel bedrooms, dogs at dusk, a man in a radio station...
- And unexpectedly, our exchanges strengthen each of us in our conviction that what is happening to the world today is wrong, and that what is often said about it is a lie.”

Later works



- In later essays, Berger wrote about photography, art, politics, and memory. He published in “The Shape of a Pocket” (2001) a correspondence with Subcomandante Marcos, and penned short stories that appeared in *The Threepenny Review* and *The New Yorker*.
- His sole volume of poetry is “Pages of the Wound”, (1994) though other volumes, such as the theoretical essay “And Our Faces, My Heart Brief as Photos” (1984) contain poetry.
- His later novels include “To the Wedding” (1995), a love story dealing with the AIDS crisis, and
- “King: A Street Story”, (1999) a novel about homelessness and shantytown life told from the perspective of a stray dog. Initially, Berger insisted that his name be kept off the cover and title page of “King”, wanting the novel to be received on its own merits.

“Why look at Animals” (2009)



- Berger's 1980 volume "About Looking" includes an influential chapter, "Why Look at Animals?" It new ground with its penetrating writings on life, art and how we see the world around us.
- Here he explores how the ancient relationship between man and nature has been broken in the modern consumer age, with the animals that used to be at the centre of our existence now marginalized and reduced to spectacle.
- The book brings together seven of Berger's essays from 1971-2001, a poem, a drawing and a new story.
- The title essay (1977) explores the ancient relationship between animals and humankind: an "unspeaking companionship". But today the caged creatures in zoos have become "the living monument to their own disappearance" from culture.
- In all these pieces, what concerns Berger is the loss of a meaningful connection to nature, a connection that can now only be rediscovered through the experience of beauty: "the aesthetic moment offers hope."
- Berger's writing is strongly 'physical', with a powerful sense of how things look, smell, feel. At his best he shows how everyday experiences - a swallow straying into a room, the performances of primates in a zoo, a peasant carving - hold the aesthetic key to unlock the true order of things.

“The Seasons in Quincy: Four Portraits of John Berger” (2016)



John Berger with Tilda Swinton during the filming of 'Harvest' (2016)

- "The four essay films which comprise 'The Seasons in Quincy' each take different aspects of British writer and thinker John Berger's life in the Haute-Savoie, and combine ideas and motifs from Berger's own work with the atmosphere of his mountain home.
- Each film was created as an individual work of art but they combine to make a feature film... showing how film can move beyond text, and beyond fine art, to offer a multifaceted and multi-layered portrait. These are more than documentary films – they are exercises in thinking in film." Derek Jarman Lab
- 'Ways of Listening', (Colin MacCabe), deals with fathers and friendship. 'Spring', (Christopher Roth), considers Berger's writing on our relationship with animals. 'A Song for Politics', (Colin MacCabe and Bartek Dziadosz), reflects on politics through archive footage, song and a discussion between Berger and several young left-wing thinkers. 'Harvest', (Tilda Swinton), revisits Quincy to meditate on belonging and continuity with Berger and his son Yves.
- Berlinale 2016 - World premiere
- <http://www.seasonsinquincy.com>



Bibliography

Fiction

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- * The Foot of Clive (1962)
- * Corker's Freedom (1964)
- * G. (1972)
- * Into Their Labours trilogy (1991): Pig Earth (1979), Once in Europa (1987), Lilac and Flag (1990)
- * To the Wedding (1995)
- * King: A Street Story (1999)
- * From A to X (2008)

Plays

- * A Question of Geography (with Nella Bielski) (1987)
- * Les Trois Chaleurs (1985)
- * Boris (1983)
- * Goya's Last Portrait (with Nella Bielski) (1989)

Screenplays

- * Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000 (with Alain Tanner) (1976)
- * La Salamandre (The Salamander) (with Alain Tanner) (1971)
- * Le Milieu du monde (The Middle of the World) (with Alain Tanner) (1974)
- * Play Me Something (with Timothy Neat) (1989)
- * Une ville à Chandigarh (A City at Chandigarh) (1966)

Poetry

- * Pages of the Wound (1994)
- * Collected Poems (2014)

Other

- Marcel Frishman (with George Besson) (1958)
- Permanent Red (1960) (Published in the United States in altered form in 1962 as Toward Reality: Essays in Seeing)
- The Success and Failure of Picasso (1965)
- A Fortunate Man (with Jean Mohr) (1967)
- Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny And the Role of the Artist in the U.S.S.R (1969)
- The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays (1969)
- The Look of Things: Selected Essays and Articles (1972)
- Ways of Seeing[27] (with Mike Dibb, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox and Richard Hollis) (1972)
- A Seventh Man (with Jean Mohr) (1975)
- About Looking (1980)
- Another Way of Telling (with Jean Mohr) (1982)
- And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos (1984)
- The White Bird (U.S. title: The Sense of Sight) (1985)
- Keeping a Rendezvous (1992)
- The Sense of Sight (1993)
- Albrecht Dürer: Watercolours and Drawings (1994)
- Titian: Nymph and Shepherd (with Katya Berger) (1996)
- Photocopies (1996)
- Isabelle: A Story in Shorts (with Nella Bielski) (1998)
- At the Edge of the World (with Jean Mohr) (1999)
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- * Berger on Drawing (2005)
- * Here is Where We Meet (2005)
- * Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance (2007; 2nd ed. 2016)[62]
- * The Red Tenda of Bologna (2007)
- * War with No End (with Naomi Klein, Hanif Kureishi, Arundhati Roy, Ahdaf Soueif, Joe Sacco and Haifa Zangana) (2007)[
- * Meanwhile (2008)
- * Why Look at Animals? (2009)
- * From I to J (with Isabel Coixet) (2009)
- * Lying Down to Sleep (with Katya Berger) (2010)
- * Railtracks (with Anne Michaels) (2011)
- * Bento's Sketchbook (2011)
- * Cataract (with Selçuk Demirel) (2012)
- * Understanding a Photograph (Geoff Dyer, ed.) (2013)
- * Daumier: The Heroism of Modern Life (2013)
- * Flying Skirts: An Elegy (with Yves Berger) (2014)
- * Portraits: John Berger on Artists (Tom Overton, ed.) (2015)
- * Cuatro horizontes (Four Horizons) (with Sister Lucia Kuppens, Sister Telchilde Hinkley and John Christie) (2015)
- * Lapwing & Fox (Conversations between John Berger and John Christie) (2016)
- * Confabulations (Essays) (2016)
- * Landscapes: John Berger on Art (Tom Overton, ed.) (2016).
- * John by Jean: Fifty Years of Friendship (Jean Mohr, ed.) (2016)
- * A Sparrow's Journey: John Berger Reads Andrey Platonov (CD: 44:34 & 81-page book with Robert Chandler and Gareth Evans), London: House Sparrow Press in association with the London Review Bookshop (2016)
- * Smoke (with Selçuk Demirel) (2017)
- * Seeing Through Drawing (with John Christie) (2017). The book, published by OBJECTIF, features new texts by and about John Berger plus a catalogue section of images, information and stories from the invited artists in the main exhibition held on 8 July – 26 August 2017 at Mandell's Gallery, Norwich. It contains two previously unpublished sequences of correspondence on art and communications between John Berger and his daughter Katya Berger Andreadakis along with tributes and stories from: Anne Michaels, Yves Berger, Eulàlia Bosch, Geoff Dyer, Gareth Evans, Paul Gordon and Tom Overton. The book also features a compilation of writings on the art and practice of drawing collected together by John Christie, from across John Berger's art criticism, fiction, essays and letters.