

# The Fuller-Berger controversy: teaching Visual Literacy to Students of Social Sciences

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper discusses the difficulty of teaching visual literacy to students of Communication whose visual skills are compromised by an overexposure to images rather than a lack of visual experience. Traditional arts and literature are nowadays not only a humanistic background for educated people but a necessary therapy in order to acquire knowhow of audiovisual ecology. To illustrate that point, this paper draws on the views expressed by Peter Fuller in Seeing Through Berger (1988), a strong critique of John Berger's bestselling work *Ways of Seeing*. Fuller argues that Berger undermines the importance of the study of traditional arts subjects (albeit only implicitly), and that the lack of such study weakens students' visual skills, above all, in terms of critical consideration and response. Fuller's remarks, which address the challenges facing those teachers involved in teaching fine arts, are of equal relevance in communication, field in which I am concern at the moment.

**KEYWORDS**— Art, Berger, Visual Communication, Ideology

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The argument that students nowadays are better on visual literacy than preceding generations because of their exposure to images, moving and still, from a very early age has become something of a critical truism in recent times. However, my experience as a lecturer of Cultural Foundations of Communication in a School of Media (Journalism, Audio-visual communication and Advertisement) year after year betrays the misconceived premise that underlies such a position. Most of my students have chosen an area in which they feel comfortable, because they have spent many hours in front of the television and computer screen, acquiring a formidable set of media skills. However, at the same time and as a consequence, they belong to a generation which spends little or not enough time reading and thinking conceptually –which implies abstract thought rather than imagination. Unfortunately there is no good translation of the word Literacy into Spanish; and I like this concept, because I believe that the written word is a necessary complement to images: to read helps to look with a critical eye, and it is necessary to learn to look with a critical eye – the only form of seeing that is truly free. I have worked on this concept more deeply in J. Latorre (2008)[1]

Many hours spent in thrall to a screen are no guarantee of a real visual education; if anything, it may raise the viewer's threshold of tolerance to 'noise', be it auditory or visual. Therefore, the difficulties students encounter are provoked, first, by the lack of what we might refer to as an adequate visual ecology or 'visual framework'; a set of critical skills which would allow them to distinguish what is valuable and enabling in visual culture from dross or *spam*. Second, such a level of image-saturation can only lead to reductionist attitudes with respect to visual literacy: Disregard for proportion, form, color and rhythm impoverishes the power of perception and appreciation of reality in order to communicate it with perfection and effectiveness to others.

The divorce between art and the media cannot be explained only by the prevailing economic policy in our highly technical and consumerist mass society. There are, furthermore, other reasons due to the very nature of

the media, and we have to take those into account too. For example, the media are in large part responsible for the loss of the down time needed for the artistic experience, which is above all an intellectual activity and requires an adequate level of cultural background. Taking reflective distance in this way, which is made vastly more difficult by the context of constant change in the media, is further exacerbated in a culture of simulacrum with the loss of credibility of verisimilitude (which goes far beyond the mere copying or loss of the original that Benjamin defined). According to Dorfles (1981), even the closest reality loses truth when filmed or televised: there is a “loss of the notion of the real and the fictional; there is no separation, no isolation necessary for the aesthetic experience, but this has very negative consequences at the psychological and morale level”[2].

## II. SEEING THROUGH THEORY

The optimist line of Marxism thought experienced a resurgence in the 1960's when the most influential representatives of the New Left movement in Germany, Jürgen Habermas and Hans Magnus Enzensberger, drew on the work of Walter Benjamin – in particular, his 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” – to argue that the reproducible media, and especially cinema, might in the right hands (and *not* those of Hollywood) be put to good use in stirring the masses towards socialist revolution. This position inspired a new generation of cultural theorists who had grown up with television and the film industry, not to mention *rock'n'roll*, and sparked passionate debates about whether particular works of popular culture were liberating or repressive, marginal or hegemonic, forms of dominance or resistance – and so on *ad dialecticam* [3].

This outline of philosophical perspectives provides the context for an enabling understanding of the debate between Berger and Fuller. A great communicator, John Berger set out in his enormously successful book and television series *Ways of Seeing* (1972) to transform the ways in which the great art-works of times past and the communications media of times present were to be seen. Berger's book opens with the very well-known sentence: “Seeing comes before words”. We live in a visual world in which experience of images precedes images of words. Images allow us to recognize and find our place in the world from when we are very young. Moreover, images from the past – above all, paintings – show us in ways both richer and more precise than literature that we are heirs to another world. Berger is not convinced that this insight is always or necessarily good; he argues that the ease with which images may be seen and interpreted is conditioned by a wide range of presuppositions about what art is; a set of prejudices which, because it does not take new concerns into account (specifically modern concerns: Berger follows optimistic Benjamin's line of Marxism in this regard), serves to obscure the past rather than reveal it. In Berger's words, “they mystify rather than clarify”. And such a blurred perception of the past can only yield a distorted vision of the present[4].

For Berger, this situation is not an accident but a conscious failing, in that “a privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes” (...) “A total approach to art would relate it to every aspect of ordinary people's real lives. Instead, we have been left with the ‘esoteric approach’ of a few specialized experts who act as clerks to the interest of the ruling class (...). This ‘cultural hierarchy’ of specialists has hijacked the meaning of art and so the meaning of the past. That is why the entire art of the past has now become a political issue”[5].

In relation to his view that some art historians had failed or forgotten to give due importance to the sociopolitical, religious etc. motives that lie behind works of art, Berger's position seems unassailable. Some writings occasionally give the impression that what is being described are not merely art-works but sacred relics; there is a general obsession with the notion of authenticity, traces of a new cult of aestheticism, and a sense of reverence for the museum. In practice, too, many museums have taken on the air of holy places, in which complete silence must be kept, no photographs may be taken, etc. The development of new modes of reproduction (books and postcards, and now the internet) might have been expected to weaken this sense of reverence, but they appear to have had the opposite effect: they underscore the prestige and status, the singularity of the art-work that may only be truly contemplated – venerated even – *in situ*, in the space in which

it is on display. The line of argument exemplified by Berger's work, therefore, seeks to put art in its proper place, stripping it of the aura of the sacred conferred by the museum space; it follows, therefore, that resistance to this critique may be seen as amounting to little more than nostalgia for past ages of hierarchy and inequality. Berger's criticism was certainly necessary at this point.

### **III. SEEING THROUGH BERGER**

Berger does well in providing a closer knowledge of the truth about such capitalistic strategies, but difficulties arise when this hermeneutic of suspicion replaces aesthetic experience, as Peter Fuller denounced in *Seeing Through Berger* (1988), a strong critique of John Berger's bestselling work *Ways of Seeing*. Fuller argues that Berger undermines the importance of the study of traditional arts subjects (albeit only implicitly), and that the lack of such study weakens students' visual skills, above all, in terms of critical reflection and response. Fuller was also the first to point out that Berger's book inspired a range of prejudices in generations of art students who "despise aesthetic experience and think that there was nothing they could learn from a museum that they could not pick up from a newspaper magazine" [6]. With Fuller's words, Berger's book was an unconscious collaboration with Margaret Thatcher's technocrat government, which showed little or no interest in the aesthetic; "a dated and dangerous tract which provides the justification for philistinism of whatever political colors" [7].

Fuller's stance was all the more controversial because it too draws on left-wing philosophical thinking and adduces many of the arguments and examples used by Berger to make its case. Berger acknowledged Fuller's criticisms of his work and accepted that his approach had been deliberately partial and polemical, arguing that his purpose had been to provoke a reaction from his readers. Nevertheless, Berger and Fuller have severed all ties since, and their respective followers likewise keep a guarded distance from one another [8]. Despite the fact of the importance of this polemic, a new edition of Berger's book is published in Spain every year and his critical perspective remains almost entirely unquestioned; his position as one of the fathers of modern visual culture, which is marked by an attitude of suspicion rather than respect or awe in response to images, seems secure.

While no in-depth study of the issue has yet been carried out, it seems clear that, despite marked political differences, the virulent anti-aestheticism and the conviction that the masses should have the final word, might also serve the purposes of the most recent "democratic" claims of late capitalism about statistics of audiences, and the consequent loss of quality in favor of quantity.

Berger's methodology is in large part to blame for this problem. We now know that this ideological approach that was once presented as "true" was in fact based on a set of presuppositions about power that, in turn, condition Berger's own reductionist analysis of the history of art [9]. My purpose, like Fuller's, is to insist on the value of an aesthetic concerns that Berger's line of argument devalued or ignored – that is, personal aesthetic experience, which is at the heart of art appreciation.

### **IV. SOME USEFUL ART PRACTICES IN VISUAL LITERACY FOR STUDENTS**

Although Fuller regards his contribution to the debate in general as valuable, he rejects the central idea of Berger's approach: that everything may be explained in sociopolitical and economic terms. Indeed, Fuller goes further: he holds that the greater a work of art, the more difficult it is to reduce it to the ideology of its times – that is, great art transcends its origins. Fuller looks for support for his position in the same works that Berger had analyzed, among which were many of the most emblematic art-works from the past, including Frans Hals's paintings of the *Regents and Regentesses of the Old Men's Alms House*.

This line of argument might be applied to any other work of art; to take an example from Spanish art history, Velázquez's *La Rendición de Breda* – also known as *Las lanzas* – might be discussed in these same terms. *La Rendición de Breda* ["The Surrender of Breda"] is one of many similar pieces, propagandistic in nature, produced to commemorate the naval successes of the Spanish Imperial fleet in all corners of the known world, and it was painted to adorn the room in the Alcázar (castle) in which King Philip IV received foreign ambassadors. This space is now property of the new Prado Museum, and there is a plan to display the collection of works in its original context, designed by Velázquez himself [10]. Today, as then, the image painted by Velázquez transcends the circumstances of its time, reflecting less the brutal reality of the victory of battle than the human values of mercy and brotherhood-in-arms, irrespective of whether these values were true of the men and scene depicted. In contrast, the other related paintings – twelve in all, by artists as illustrious as Zurbarán, Pereda, Maíno and others – all of which more closely follow the lines laid down by the political impetus and ideology of power of their time, receive little or no attention. A similar phenomenon may be observed in the field of audiovisual communications: television series or films produced with an eye to maximizing short-term profits from audience rating figures or in the light of particular ideological interests do not in general stand the test of time. Works of art, on the other hand, initiate a dialogue with the viewer, leave space open for alternative opinions, and move beyond the claims of their historical context by also including the viewer's perspective. This process may be close to the heart of what Umberto Eco refers to as the "open work" [11].

A similar phenomenon may be observed in Modern Art: Picasso's *Guernica* is a good example of Propaganda becoming open Art, and for that reason it symbolizes the victims of all wars, and not only the Spanish war. Picasso's *Guernica* in the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid is a useful example in this context. The next step, once they have recovered the interest in History of Art, is to provide students with an opportunity to experience works of art *in situ*. Among other things, it serves to correct a defect in visualization that is quite common nowadays: *Guernica* is 27 meters square, in an extended ratio (1:22) that obliges the onlooker to view the painting in a panoramic way, a perspective that is wholly unfamiliar to many of the present generation of students. The habits of visualization generated by the new media – the 4:3 or 16:9 formats of video technology, or the more recent formats of mobile telephones and PDAs – are based on a centric way of seeing, a form of vision that contributes to the sensation that images are appropriated or consumed by the viewer. Experiencing the art-work directly in the museum enables an authentic aesthetic experience – a contemplative response, rather than a consumerist one.

## V. CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this paper is to call into question some of the theoretical principles that underlie academic explanation and justification of the current, compromised state of visual communication studies, focused mostly in technological and rhetorical skills. My experience is that direct contact with works of art help students of Communication to complete their formation with a creative knowledge which allows them to combine the mere entertainment -simple pleasure or superficial enjoyment- with other visual practices such as astonishment at the perfection of beauty and the sublime -which can also be genuine ugliness, understood as truth, authenticity, even though it is displayed in an unpleasant form. The culture of memory and the permanence which is characteristic of the art world – in whose creative process the three dimensions of time appear in unison- is also necessary to balance with real wisdom the fleetingness of the dissemination of information, excessively linked to the swiftly present moment.

But, for communication students (and university students in general) to become aware of the advantages of this way of living art, they first have to see the need to do it, and negotiate the many current academic obstacles which stop them from giving the art of the past sufficient importance in their university education with a view to a better professional future. In this respect, I believe that the main source of the problem of inadequate visual ecology faced by our communication students is not only rooted in modern media society itself, but also in the consensus in academia that everything is reduced to ideology; a position that renders real visual education impossible. The Berger-Fuller controversy is just one example of the many sources of the ideological wars and

his unpredictable harms, which, unfortunately, are widespread in the humanities and social sciences and must be overcome, as Gombrich denounced long time ago:

“Life is often sad, and it is barbarous cruelty to want to cut off our young people from this source of strength, from the inspiration they can derive throughout their lives from this vitalizing contact with the masterpieces of art, literature, philosophy and music, whatever their future employment or unemployment will demand of them” [12].

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