A guest review

Bento's Sketchbook—John Berger's "Way of Seeing" Spinoza

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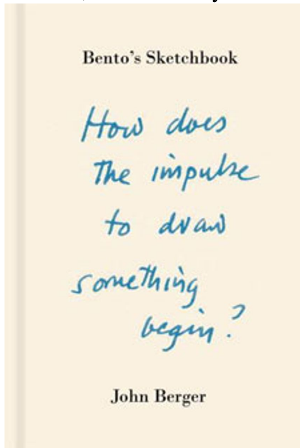
Bento's Sketchbook*, by John Berger, Pantheon Books, 2011 (in Great Britain, Verso)*

A reader has submitted a review of a new work by the well-known cultural critic and historian, John Berger.

The more an image is joined with many other things, the more often it flourishes. The more an image is joined with many other things, the more causes there are by which it can be excited.

(Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition XIII, Proof)

Drawing is one of the earliest known forms of human art. The cave paintings of Chauvet, France, dating back at least 30,000 years, reveal a high level of aesthetic sophistication on the part of their creators. The viewer of these images can believe that the people who made them had an overwhelming need to create such works, as witness and record of how they saw their world. Later on in human history, a basic knowledge of drawing was widespread among educated men and women, and it was common practise to carry around a sketchbook in which to capture one's impressions, the same way a camera does today.



Cultural critic-historian and novelist John Berger's *Bento's Sketchbook* is a collection of stories, some of them simply vignettes, always connected to a drawing, either as the source of the story or the result of it. The "Bento" of the book's title is Baruch or Benedict de Spinoza (November 24, 1632—February 21, 1677), who holds an important place in the development of modern Western thought. A Jew of Portuguese descent, he was raised in Amsterdam, living alongside distinguished contemporaries such as Rembrandt.

In spite of the comparatively liberal attitude toward religious diversity that prevailed in Amsterdam—a port city that welcomed people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds—Spinoza was excommunicated from his synagogue for his heretical ideas. He left Amsterdam, eventually settling in The Hague, and while making a modest living as a lens-grinder, wrote the works that were to establish him posthumously as one of the great theorists of the Enlightenment.

His writings helped to replace the edifice of medieval scholastic thinking with a rational vision in which all things that exist, including minds, can be understood as parts of a whole ("nature") not influenced or controlled by anything outside itself. His *Ethics,* a remarkable document that he withheld from publication during his lifetime, was a refutation of the mind-body dualism of Descartes.

In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus,* Spinoza dissected religious and political attitudes prevailing at the time, rejecting nationalism along with the concept of Jews as the "chosen people," and asserted that the Bible was not a divinely revealed text, but one compiled from many sources. It was Hegel who said: "You are either a Spinozist or not a philosopher at all." Marx was also without question influenced by his reading of Spinoza, though the extent of that influence has been debated.

Spinoza is known to have kept a sketchbook of his own drawings, which has not survived. John Berger engages in a conversation with the philosopher, imagining himself together with Spinoza seeing and drawing the world around him. Having written extensively about the meaning of painting and photography, Berger here turns his attention to the reasons for drawing, why it is important for humans to draw. Objects, people and events are asking to be drawn, to be described by an articulate witness who can interpret their meaning and worth, and pass it on to others.

We who draw do so not only to make something observed visible to others, but also to accompany something invisible to its incalculable destination. (Page 14)

We are drawn into a variety of settings, including Berger's home village, a public swimming pool in Paris, a hard-discount megamart where employees and customers alike are trapped in a kind of managerial hell all too familiar to countless numbers of the urban poor. There is a humorous depiction of the author himself, an old man getting kicked out of the National Gallery in London for stubbornly leaving his pack on the floor while drawing a copy of Antonello da Messina's painting of the Crucifixion. Ordered to leave by a member of the contracted security staff—who has no sense of connection to the art works he is there to protect—Berger loses his temper and swears at him.

There is a tribute to Berger's first publisher, Erhard Frommhold of Dresden, who was accused of "formalism and bourgeois decadence" by the East German Stalinist bureaucracy and sacked from his position as director of the Verlag der Kunst…not imprisoned but sentenced to perform "socially useful work" in a public park as a gardener's assistant.

After each encounter, we are given a quotation from Spinoza that captures the essence of the experience.

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We sense and experience that we are eternal. For the mind no less senses those things which it conceives in understanding than those which it has in the memory. For the eyes of the mind by which it sees things and observes them are proofs. So although we do not remember that we existed before the body, we sense nevertheless that our mind in so far as it involves the essence of the body under a species of eternity is eternal and its existence cannot be defined by time or explained by duration.

(Spinoza, *Ethics,* Part V, Proposition XXIII) (Page 15)

John Berger (born 1926) has produced a remarkable body of work, as art critic, novelist, essayist, and writer for stage and film. His previous works include *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (1965, updated 1989), which presents a daringly critical view of the celebrity artist while he was still alive, and *Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny and the Role of the Artist in the USSR* (1969), in which the author describes the artist's effort to maintain his vision of the true social role of art in the face of official disapprobation and censorship.

In *A Fortunate Man* (1967, Vintage International Edition 1997) a photographic essay written in collaboration with the Swiss photographer Jean Mohr, Berger takes the efforts of a country doctor to articulate the meaning of his life and work as the basis for an exploration of the meaning of all human endeavour. Individual essays by Berger also stand out in the memory, including *The Moment of Cubism* (1969) and *Ernst Fischer: a Philosopher and Death* (1972).

It was the 1972 BBC television series *Ways of Seeing,* and the book based upon it, that established Berger as a public figure. (Many college students today are familiar with Berger's name only in connection with *Ways of Seeing,* which continues to be assigned as a text.) The series was a response to Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation*, and presented a critique of the view of Western art as it was set forth in Clark's program.

Berger examined the history of European art from a materialist perspective, influenced by the thought of Walter Benjamin (whose essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" he credited as a direct source for his ideas). In one episode, devoted to the role of the nude in Western art, Berger forcefully counters Clark's views by showing how the nude (mainly female) body has been commodified and exploited. There is also a delightful segment in which the views of children as interpreters of famous art works are treated with the utmost respect.

Ways of Seeing had a tremendous impact on art criticism at the time of its release. In the years since, the influence of post-modernism has had its negative effect. Berger's presentation, eye-opening to many at the time, of how the Western art tradition is bound up with the interests of the ruling classes and of capitalism, has been dismissed by reactionary commentators as old-fashioned, even quaint. From a socialist perspective, his apparent alignment with certain conceptions of the Frankfurt School and academic "left" (for example, his contention that capitalism can appropriate virtually any concept, including revolution, to serve its own ends) has its negative implications. His prolific output continues to be unknown to many who know of him only through *Ways of Seeing*.

Berger long ago left England to live in the French Alps, in a village set steeply into the mountains, allowing for only a limited amount of mechanization. He has written extensively about why he chose to commit himself to a simpler way of life: in particular, he has been at pains to explain that he did so in order to be a witness to the way in which a marginalized class of people (European peasants) manage to survive and make the transition to a new, urbanized way of life (as chronicled in his trilogy *Into Their Labours*).

Living in geographical isolation (though travelling extensively), Berger has continued to identify with others around the world who are marginalized, not by choice. He has written eloquently about migrant workers, people displaced by war and famine and the plight of the Palestinian people. He is adamant about his opposition to the present world order, and vocal in his support for those who are oppressed by it.

But Berger does not align himself with any clear program for the socialist transformation of society—a legitimate criticism. When asked, "Are you still a Marxist?" his response is, "I am still, among other things." Berger's political evolution took him from ambiguous support for the Stalinist oppression of the Hungarian uprising of 1956 (in an early novel, *A Painter of Our Time*), through the activist period of the 1960s, to the broad humanism of his more recent writings.

Unlike other radicals who enjoyed a measure of fame during the 1960s, he has not turned his back on the ideals that animated him from the beginning of his career; however, his belief in their realization appears to have wavered. There is an elegiac and wistful element now in much of his writing that often seems like a lament for a lost faith: "It was history then, not brand-names, that began with a capital letter." (Page 41)

But there is no doubt about his humanity and his heart, or his unique voice. Reading Berger can be an experience of the power of the written word in the hands of a gifted writer to create subtle and intense mental images and feelings. He has a devotion to the authenticity of sensual and emotional experience, and an ability to be present in several centuries at once, that brings to the reader a vivid sense of being part of a history of struggle for art and human dignity. His influence can be detected in the style of other writers (Canadian novelist Michael Ondaatje is a well-known example).

Berger is particularly eloquent in describing the process of attention and assimilation involved in creating a work of art, the need to face uncertainty and the mystery of experience, in a way that makes art an antidote to the degrading of human consciousness that characterizes capitalism. The words of the Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelöf come to mind: "The impractical is the only practical in the long run." The process of art can never be controlled by managers.

I live in a state of habitual confusion. By confronting the confusion I sometimes achieve a certain lucidity. You showed us how to do this. (Page 139)

It must be admitted that Berger's acceptance of uncertainty and confusion indicates that he has to some degree resigned himself to a less than complete commitment to real social change, or to a definite program for achieving it. Berger has faith in humanity, in our ability to save our creative potential from destruction by a system that is hostile to its realization. But his faith in the inevitable end of capitalism is not so apparent. His great gifts as a storyteller can be appreciated, while recognizing the inadequacy of his political vision.

Here is a link to John Berger reading excerpts from *Bento's Sketchbook*.

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