Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but word can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. John Berger’s Ways of Seeing is one of the most stimulating and the most influential books on art in any language. First published in 1972, it was based on the BBC television series about which the London Sunday Times critic commented: This is an eye-opener in more ways than one: by concentrating on how we look at paintings ... he will almost certainly change the way you look at pictures. By now he has.

Even though Ways of Seeing is a flawed book in many ways, it is so seminal in the development of post-modern image making that it must be considered essential reading in critical theory.

The book is based on a television series. The book itself is only 176 pages. The print is all in a bold, sans-serif font. The authors are quick to claim that the book was made, not written. The pictures used to demonstrate the points are small and in black and white.

The book is based on the theory that the interpretation of western art evolved out of the power and finance structure of western civilization. Inevitably books that describe the world primarily in economic terms, as an arena of conflict and a battle by the rich for dominance of the poor, are referred to by some as Marxist and I have no doubt this book has been so described.

The book has seven chapters, four of which are written and three of which are reproductions of art works without words. The theme developed is that the way people view art is strongly affected by the power structure of the society.

I must confess that the three chapters that were solely illustrated were difficult for me to engage, both because of the size of the images as well as the difficulty of following the thread which I felt ran through the pictures even though I was not able to decode the message.
The first chapter is based on and explicates the work of the critic Walter Benjamin in his essay, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. Unlike Benjamin, who sometimes seems torn between the loss of the aura of the original and the benefit of mass accessibility, Berger seems to believe that real benefits will derive from the reproduced work of art, if the viewer can sweep away the lenses of the past through which he might view the work.

The third chapter deals with the role of art in the commodification of women and the fifth chapter examines the role of oil painting in the reduction of people's worldview to a matter of money. (Burger only excepts the work of a few artists, like Rembrandt, from this view.) The final chapter is based upon the use of images for marketing.

This work is important because, if it did not shape the outlook of postmodern art, it was at least in the vanguard of recognizing the roles of the art that preceded post-modernism, and led to the rejectionist point of view.

Berger is clear in emphasizing that the way we view art is filtered through the prism of culture in the sociological sense, although that certainly was not ground breaking in critical theory, even at the time of first publication. On the other hand, here was art criticism first presented on what was then a new media, television. Even the book format, such as using a bold-faced font throughout the book, appealed to the avant-garde.

Burger would substitute art, not as a tool to help preserve an economic and power system, but rather as a way for the consumer of art to enrich his own life.

I suspect that artists other then post-modernists may not benefit very much in their work from reading Ways of Seeing. On the other hand, if you have a serious interest in critical theory, even though you may reject Berger's thesis, you must read this book.

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Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series by John Berger - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!