

What is painted survives within the shelter of the painting, within the shelter of the having-been-seen. The *home* of a true painting is this shelter.

1982

## On visibility

To look:

at everything which overflows the outline, the contour, the category, the name of what it is.

All appearances are continually changing one another: visually everything is interdependent. Looking is submitting the sense of sight to the experience of that interdependence. To look *for* something (a pin that has dropped) is the opposite of this looking. Visibility is a quality of light. Colours are the faces of light. This is why looking is to recognize, enter a whole. Identity of an object or colour or form is what visibility *reveals*: it is a conclusion of visibility; but it has nothing to do with the *process* of visibility which is as uncontainable, which is as much a form of energy as light itself. Light which is the source of all life. The visible is a feature of that life; it cannot exist without it. In a dead universe nothing is visible.

Visibility is a form of growth.

Aim: to see the appearance of a thing (even an inanimate thing) as a stage in its growth – or as a stage in a growth of which it is part. To see its visibility as a kind of flowering.

Clouds gather visibility, and then disperse into invisibility. All appearances are of the nature of clouds.

The hyacinth grows into visibility. But so does the garnet or sapphire.

Not to say that *behind* appearances is the truth, the Platonic way. It is very possible that visibility *is* the truth and that what lies outside visibility are only the 'traces' of what has been or will become visible.

To look at light.

To recognize that outlines are an invention.

To transcend scale: a few blades of grass as large as the sky looks: the ant visibly coexistent with the mountain: in its *visibility* comparable with the mountain. Perhaps that's the point. The fact is visibility (inseparable from light) is greater than its categories of measurement (small, big, distant, near, dark, light, blue, yellow, etc.).

To look is to rediscover, over and beyond these measurements, the primacy of visibility itself.

The eye receiving.

But also the eye intercepting. The eye intercepts the continual intercourse between light and the surfaces which reflect and absorb it. Separate objects are like isolated words. Meaning is only to be found in the relation between them. What is the meaning to be found in the visible? A form of energy, continually transforming itself.

*Exercise.*

Look:

White transparent curtains across the window.

Light coming from the right.

Shadows of folds, hanging folds, darker than clouds.

Suddenly sunlight.

The window frames now cast shadows across the curtains.

The shadows are convoluted following the folds: the window frames are straight and rectangular.

Between the curtains and the window: a space like the lines on which music is written: but three-dimensional, and the notes of light, rather than sound. The space between the rectangular window frames and their shadows convoluted because the curtains hang in folds half-transparently.

Looking through the curtain, a cloud crossing the sky, its upper edge yellowy silver and undulating – with almost exactly the same rhythm as the convolutions of the shadows (now disappeared because the sun

has gone in). The cloud is moving fast. Almost at gale speed.

On the houses opposite the wrought-iron balconies are absolutely still. For an instant the sun comes out again.

Snake shadow – gone.

Clouds moving.

Sea swelling.

Charlie's van comes back.

A heavy swell at sea.

A memory. Visual.

Tall cliffs. White. With straight horizontal lines of dark flashing grey flint. Between the lines centuries of chalk deposit.

The fringe of the cliffs against the sky, grass hanging over.

The thickness of the turf in relation to the height of the cliffs like the thickness of an animal's fur. At the height of the grass gulls wheeling.

Figures of eight cut off by the cliff. The shadows of the cliffs on the sea (the tide is in, almost up to the cliffs.)

The shadow of the cliffs on the sea, lying on the sea, from the water's edge to eighty metres out: the length of the coast. In the shadow of the cliff the sea is almost brown.

Further out, just beyond the shadow of the grass fringe, the sea is a green mixed with a little white. The green that oxidized copper goes, but with sun. As I write this very sentence, the sun comes out above Noel Road, casts the shadow of the window frame on the curtains, the curtains stir in the window, my pen casts a shadow on this paper and the sun goes in.

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The Works of John Berger

*Pig Earth* (first book  
of the *Into Their Labours* trilogy)

*Once in Europa* (second book of the trilogy)

*Lilac and Flag* (third book of the trilogy)

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G.

*About Looking*

*And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*

*The Sense of Sight*

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# THE SENSE OF SIGHT

Writings by John Berger

Edited and with an introduction by

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