



Yvonne Roberts

Yvonne Roberts is an award-winning journalist, novelist and broadcaster. She has written on feminism, politics and social policy issues for over thirty years, working in print and television. Her fourth novel, *Shake!* set in 1967, will be published by Headline in spring 2004. She lives with her partner and two

Ways of Seeing

hair on traditional nudes was removed because it denoted potency and passion. The men who paid for these paintings wanted women, supine, submissive. "Women are thereto feed an appetite, not to have one of their own."

In an often repeated quote, Berger says, "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves."

The mirror was often used as a symbol of female vanity, revealing a double hypocrisy, Berger says. A male artist painted a naked woman for his and his patron's pleasure, then you morally condemn her by giving her a mirror. "The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight."

In words that continue to resonate today, in spite of the advances for women, Berger writes, "To be born a woman [is] to be born in an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space... From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually."

Just as paintings convey covert messages about the wealth and position and status of the man who has commissioned the work of art - so advertising and publicity, "the culture of the consumer society" signals, "to each of us that we transform ourselves, and our lives by buying something more". The myth is that by spending and becoming poorer, we will also somehow become richer.

While the acquisition of art, confirmed and consolidated a man's position in society - advertising, in contrast, plays on our general anxiety that if you have nothing, you will be nothing. But if you buy, you may become something you are not: improved, shinier, more successful.

Berger argues that the art of acquiring has over-ridden all other activities while the worship of glamour, fed as it is by envy, corrodes a sense of mutuality on which a community depends. At the same time, publicity turns consumption into a substitute for democracy. "The choice of what one eats (or wears or drives) takes the place of significant political choice. Publicity helps to mask and compensate for all that is undemocratic within society. And it also masks what is happening in the rest of the world."

The onslaught of consumerism; the constant message that new is better and obsolescence is inevitable, is proving far more destructive to longevity in relationships as the individualism which has emerged in the past forty or so years, the decline in religious belief and

the increased economic and social freedom of women .

If I wielded any power, I'd make "Ways of Seeing", required reading for all adults, once a year, to reawaken our sense of vigilance about what is being done to us, and our relationships, in the name of "freedom", choice and profit.



The woman stands naked, shorn of pubic hair, in a field, watched by a couple of dogs as she admires herself in a mirror. "Vanity" by the 15th century painter, Hans Memling, might be a portrait of female, brazen in her self confidence - until you read John Berger, and you "see" not just the painting very differently but also the society in which we live.

"Ways of Seeing" was written by Berger thirty years ago but the power of this slim, sparse book, originally based on a BBC television series, is long lasting and magical. Each time I re-read it, it yields something more, and challenges afresh.

Berger draws parallels between the place of art through the ages and modern day advertising (it's even more relevant to the current obsession with celebrity). "The way we see things," he points out, "is affected by what we know and what we believe." In the age of technology art is available to all - the Mona Lisa, for instance, is on calendars, tee-shirts and used in ads. Yet, "art", Berger argues, has been hijacked by a hand full of specialists, who mystify it, closet it away in museums, an blind us to its real meaning.

When I first read *Ways of Seeing*, in the mid Seventies, it was literally as if the light had been switched on. Take Memling's painting. Berger points out that the public