

## Art and Politics in John Berger's Novel *A Painter of Our Time*

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During the past two decades, art educators have been made more aware of the influence of ideologies in both art and education. We have seen, for example, as with Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), and recent feminist art and scholarship, the degree to which art has been complicit in the stereotyping of women. We have been made increasingly aware of the broader social and political dimensions of art and art education, and of the art of different ethnic groups. This journal is partly responsible for that shift of understanding.

More recently, however, the debate about the relationship between art and politics and its implications for art education has become somewhat polarized. Roughly, this has taken the form of a division between those who argue for the study of an apolitical, aesthetically autonomous art<sup>1</sup> and those who see art in education as an avenue for asserting certain socio-political concerns, for example, marxist or feminist, and various kinds of community action while denying lofty aesthetic ideals in favour of more popular and accessible art images.<sup>2</sup> Here there are many tensions to be explored. How, it is sometimes asked, can an approach to art that is formalist, individualist, influenced

oftentimes by the preoccupations of an economic elite, and frozen in expensive museums speak to the problems and varied artistic concerns of ordinary people, many of whom are disenfranchised by reason of poverty, race, gender, and unemployment? How can such art be both socially just and connected to the ubiquities of life for the majority? How can such art improve the lot of the ordinary person? Conversely, a question often posed is, "How can art that sees its role primarily as one of changing society, or of upholding a specific revolutionary perspective, while denying formal values, avoid lapsing into the crudities, falsities, and excesses of propaganda?"

To put the matter of this conflict in such stark terms is to perhaps misunderstand what is at stake. Until recently, art has typically retained an interest in form. Art from a variety of cultures and times frequently embodies its meanings in well-designed visual forms. Attention to the shape and appearance of content is one of the things that has served to distinguish art as art. The carved totem poles of the Haida people, for example, are as articulate and enchanting in appearance as any piece of European sculpture. For many people, the aesthetic form of art, or the logic and sensitivity of its appearance (which is not to exclude subject-matter and a certain amount of disorder!) is crucial to its production, understanding, and appreciation. Also, the idea that art has some value in its own right is still something of a commonplace, i.e., art is more than a tool, a means, or a mode of communication. It is something in itself. In this sense, it has more in common with poetry than text. On the other hand, artists live in a world beset by human rights concerns, by state violence (think of Tiananmen Square and Kent State), by problems of union corruption and corporate greed, and by wanton disregard for the environment. What thinking, feeling person can remain unaffected by that? Choice of subject is one way artists express their social and moral concerns.

The challenge in art education, I would suggest, is to enable students to develop and exercise their artistic capabilities without giving way to either the irresponsibility of the aesthete or the stridency and bias of the ideologue. But in practice this is easier said than done and much hinges here on the purposes that are assumed for education. The point about educational purpose is important, for it is education in the broader sense that provides,

or should provide, the context in which art is taught in schools. I take it that the main task of education is to help students know, understand, and appreciate the complexities of experience such that they are enabled to make free, valid, and supportable judgements about its meaning and worth. Art as an educational subject, I suggest, is one way of knowing and imagining among others; it is a visual and aesthetic way of enabling students to express ideas, feelings and values that are personally meaningful and understandable to others. Also, I take it that in a free and moral society education should foster respect for persons. This impinges on its manner, which must be truth-regarding, and fair, rather than persuasive, in the case of political and social doctrines, for example, and considerate of the intellectual autonomy and well-being of individuals. Education is one thing, indoctrination is another. Thus, all ideas may be rationally questioned and if found wanting, rejected — especially those of our teachers and other authorities. Education in this sense develops an independence of mind, valued for its own sake. I take this view because it seems to me that it is the only adequately defensible one in a democratic community. But this view represents an ideal connected with a certain liberal tradition. I accept it because it values knowledge, is inherently self-critical, and is committed to the justification of claims by reason and evidence: principles which are themselves the very basis of rational engagement.

I shall not defend the conception further but note that it underpins my perspective in this paper and is not incompatible with the ideals expressed in the novel by John Berger discussed below.

While there is a wealth of current academic writing in art education that focuses on socio-political questions, there is another way to approach the question of the relationship of art and politics that bears scrutiny by art educators. And here I am referring to the range of novels and stories that compose the wider literary genre. Speaking on a broader front, I have long held the belief that literature is, or can be, more helpful to teachers than most “scientific” writing about education especially where that writing is informed by the tenets of behavioural psychology. (And it is important to remember the pervasive influence of this approach on educational research.) This is

because literature immerses the reader in the complexities of life with something like the immediacy of felt experience.

Literature provides details of the richness and ambiguity of the particular, something science leaves out. “Laws,” “theories,” or “principles” of human action, and conduct are always suspect in as much as no two human beings, no two classrooms are ever fully alike. Also, persons and their interactions are only properly understandable in light of their motivations, and such things cannot be directly observed and measured.

Literature does not search for theories. It expresses possibilities of life (Kundera, 1986) in contexts that are at once typical, and to some extent, unique. What we learn from literature is how certain types of individuals, characterized as specific persons, cope with life’s contradictions and challenges through descriptions of their thoughts, feelings and actions. There is no reduction here; the subject is the whole person caught in the flux of existence.

Literature provides insightful images of life in the form of art that permits the sharing of experience. For that reason it has the power to touch us on many levels: intellectually, emotionally, and aesthetically. It can be a powerful resource for educators. If you want to know and get a feel for what it can be like to be a beginning teacher frightened by the challenge of teaching a large unruly class in the inner city, read what happens to Ursula Brangwen in D.H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* (1949). This is the story of a young woman working in a situation that we would now find extreme. Nevertheless, it contains truths about the life of teaching that most teachers could relate to. Given certain circumstances of youth, gender, personality, inexperience, unreasonable demands, unpleasant surroundings, unhelpful colleagues, and an overly large class, an inevitable and readily understandable sequence of events is played out.

John Berger’s novel, *A Painter of Our Time* (1989), explores the way in which the concerns of art and politics cohabit, somewhat uncomfortably, in one painter’s mind. By placing these tensions in the context of somebody’s life, this novel

humanizes and makes understandable conflicts that remain intractable in the usual academic forum. In that sense alone, not to mention its elegance, economy of style, and depth of meaning, it makes valuable reading for teachers, students of art and art education. This novel is a prime example of the effectiveness of a story that is well-structured with respect to form, plot, character, choice of language, and flow of events, and is a tribute to Berger's painstaking rewriting of drafts.

The book was originally published in 1958 at the height of the cold war. It was savagely attacked by Wollheim and Spender<sup>3</sup> among others, and then withdrawn by the publishers after one month. Nowadays it reads as a fairly innocuous story of an expatriate and aging Hungarian painter, Janos Lavin, who is living and working in London in the mid-fifties and trying to come to terms with his Socialist ideals, his isolated position as an unrecognized artist in a foreign land, his financially straitened circumstances, his failed marriage, and perhaps most of all, his lifelong commitment to painting. The book is composed largely of the painter's diary, discovered, translated and annotated by "John," a friend and art critic. The year is 1956 and Janos Lavin has disappeared from his studio after the opening of his first major London exhibition leaving only a brief note to his wife, but no explanation. John takes and reads the diaries in an effort to understand what might have happened to Janos. In them he finds a whole psychological landscape of thoughts about painting, love, friendship, and the interplay between the demands of art and the painter's Socialist beliefs.

Janos's view of life and art is inspired by a quotation from Gorky, namely that: "Life will always be bad enough for the desire for something better not to be extinguished in men" (Berger, 1989, p. 5). Human capabilities, thinks Janos, are simply the ways in which we can work for the social good. Morality is more important than art. Janos believes that, "The modern artist fights to contribute to human happiness, truth or justice. He works to improve the world" (p. 144). Janos says he doesn't want a public with a high-blown aesthetic sensibility, rather, he wants a public with hope. In his view, formalist art avoids the problems of real life by becoming a self-sufficient commodity. A genuine work of art, on the other hand, thinks Janos, uses form to

interpret reality, to seek truth and "extend consciousness of what is possible in life" (p. 145). This is the way artists can improve the world.

Janos Lavin has strong Socialist beliefs but because he is also an artist he is aware of the danger of allowing politics to transform art into propaganda. The challenge the artist faces, he thinks, is to find the appropriate social basis for his or her work without putting art into the service of any narrow-minded political view or system of interpreting the world. As Janos puts it:

You can't work for anything under the cover of art. I can't even work for Socialism under the cover of art. You can only work for something else under the cover of non-art. Art does not cover—it reveals. (p. 72)

He goes on to say in his diary, "Do not demand a Socialist Art....Demand Socialist propaganda when it is needed and encourage art....Do not ask for Socialist works of art to be judged by Socialist standards. The standards will be untrue and opportunist" (p. 147). Good, socially relevant art is produced, on this account, by artists who think through the problems of life as artists, not as politicians. "I cannot" says Janos, "serve like a waiter....I cannot, as an artist work by the light of an historical principle. I must work by the light of my senses—here and now....[the artist] faces his subject as if it were timeless" (p. 148).

Many of these ideas are echoed in the writings of neo-marxist Herbert Marcuse (1978) who argued that an art that deals truthfully with alienation and repression, for example, by means of its aesthetic form cannot help being a liberating force filled with hope. By showing images of life as it is and as it can be, something dangerous for all politicians, art can break the power of approved realities. Such art emancipates reason and imagination; it cannot be understood simply in terms of this or that money or class ideology. New and broader realities are shown in forms that can, to some extent, transcend limited socio-political boundaries. This is what Janos meant when he spoke of the artist approaching his or her subject "as if it were timeless." In political hegemonies, however, this romantic critique is ab-

sent and art is typically put in the service of the State. We have all seen pictures of smiling peasants and factory workers, and happy women road diggers nicely done up in the style of social realism. The truth about these lives, as we now know from reports and stories from places such as Cambodia, was often quite different. As Milan Kundera (1986), a writer from Czechoslovakia who has experienced the full weight of a State monopoly in art observes, "totalitarian societies project an idyllic smile. They want to be seen as one big family" (p. 110). And of course, the sophisticated images found in the Western advertising media and mass culture serve to create a consciousness of life and values that can be just as false. In this case, the propaganda is on behalf of maintaining the illusion that money and consumption — the means to obtaining the good life — bring about self-realization and fulfillment.

While there is a great deal of questioning and doubt in Janos's mind regarding the relation of art and politics, Janos seems to be saying in essence that the artist, Socialist or not, must be true to his or her own imagination and sensations even if the content of the art produced offends the politics of the class struggle, since any extension of imagination in this context is a contribution to the good of humanity. Janos believes that good art will be socially just, and by "good" art he means art that is aesthetically coherent and true, if not in fact, then in the spirit of what is possible given humankind's capabilities and yearning for something better.

I agree with Janos's conclusions. While we live in a political world we have more to lose than gain by letting art become subsumed by politics. Art has imperatives of aesthetic form, perception, imagination, truth and judgement that are ultimately more liberating for artist and viewer than doctrines, be they of left or right. The educational value of art on this accounting, resides in the discipline's capacity to develop the skills, sensibilities, and languages of form needed to help students aesthetically express ideas and feelings about the things that matter to them and to others in the community, and to understand and appreciate the art around them. The study and practice of art is liberating to the extent that it enables students to visually interpret and understand experience, and to reach penetrating insights about human life and values. Art education

need not, nor should not, succumb to politically-inspired pedagogy. It is too important to become the preserve or tool of any special interest or advocacy group. If education is more properly to be justified by reference to this or that manifesto, how can we be sure its standards are not "opportunistic." This, I think, is the message for art teachers in John Berger's book.

If art education is conducted in a manner that stresses respect for all persons, fairness, and honesty — the moral virtues that inspire a social conscience — there is reason to believe that students will be in a good position to develop their artistic understanding while being considerate of the affairs of the wider community.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Smith (1986).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Blandy and Congdon (Eds.), (1987), and a special issue of *Studies in Art Education*, Pariser & Zimmerman (Eds.), (1990), focusing on gender issues.

<sup>3</sup>Reported in the Afterword in Berger (1989, p. 196).

<sup>4</sup>I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

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