The Color of the Cosmos: John Berger on Art and the Mystery of Creativity

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In a recent review of an exhibition of Paul Cezanne's paintings at the Musée du Luxembourg, John Berger ends with this fabulous quotation: "Color is the place where our brain and the universe meet" ("Paint it Black"). Prior to this embrace with Cezanne's celestial speculation, Berger charts a movement in Cezanne's work from the revelation of the sensory corporeality in which the human body is bound to the experimentation with the visible sensation of a circumambient landscape. Towards the end of his life, Cezanne also stated that the "landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness" (qtd. in Merleau-Ponty 16). Through the distinctive use of the color black, at both the earliest and in the final phase of his painting, Berger observed that Cezanne's quest for the connection between the perception of worldly impressions and the consciousness of emergent forms opened a path for seeing how all works of art are to some extent a creation of the world. Berger claims to glimpse this world via a 'black box' that lurks in corner of a painting such as *La Pendule Noire* (1869-71).

All of Berger's writing hits you in this way. It strikes deep in the most intimate space and simultaneously throws you out towards the widest spheres. This dual perspective toward the particular and the whole is a constitutive feature of his artistic and critical imagination. In this essay I will focus on the worldview that is invoked in John Berger's critical writings. I aim to examine the extent to which this worldview contains an implicit creation story. Some aspects of a creation story have appeared more explicitly in his recent essays, and I will consider whether these elements are pervasive or representative of a fundamental shift in outlook. This will involve aligning the recent terms in Berger's criticism with the concepts such as truth, reality and place that dominated his earlier writing. In particular, it will reflect on the potential parallels between the overtly political texts with the more ontological ruminations,

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL DECEMBER 2013 DÉCEMBRE RCLC
0319–051x/13/40.4/353

and ask whether both modes of address are related to a fundamental cosmology. Finally, it will also pose a further link between creation stories and what I call the cosmopolitan imaginary (Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture* 81-92). Hence I will explore the interplay between the political and cosmological parameters in Berger's writing. This will proceed by asking a question that moves in a kind of helix motion. How does art offer an image of the world, and how does the imagination create a world?

Aesthetic Imagination

Throughout Berger's long writing career, certain methodological propositions and theoretical conceptions are put up for testing and renewal. As a critic for *The New Statesman* throughout the 1950s, he repeatedly questioned the nature, function and scope of aesthetic imagination (Papastergiadis, *Modernity as Exile* 35-79). This has been an ongoing concern in his writing. What does the term *aesthetic imagination* mean? We know that imagination is the faculty that produces images. It does not merely retrieve images. This may sound tautological but, as Gaston Bachelard reminds us, this definition of the nature of imagination has the benefit of distinguishing it from memory (Bachelard xxx). While the function of imagination is to produce new images and not simply recall the images from the past, nevertheless the relationship to time is complicated. Images lean forward and backward in time as they draw from aspects of memory and anticipate or at least attempt to foresee alternate realities. Or as Berger suggested, in a 1953 article on Jewish paintings of the yearning for a promised land, the images convey a paradoxical "nostalgia for the future" (qtd. in Papastergiadis, *Modernity as Exile* 62).

The fascination with the transformative function of the imagination has never dropped from the center of Berger's criticism. In the 1950s and 1960s, Berger was an outspoken advocate of social realism and had little patience with the formalist perspectives in art criticism (*Permanent Red*; *Art and Revolution*). Formal innovations are important for Berger but they are never seen in a vacuum. They always come hand in hand with aspirations for social transformation. This axiomatic interweaving between the politics of art and art of politics has never shifted from his writing. Berger's politics is, as he has reaffirmed, still Marxist, but I will argue that his outlook also attends to the relationship between creativity and cosmology (*Hold Everything Dear* 121).

This complex outlook is most evident in Berger's recent evocation of the places of belonging in *Bento's Sketchbook*. Through the juxtaposition of stories in which strangers find momentary recognition of each other through small gestures of hospitality, to the meditations on the writing of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, Berger provides an optic that oscillates between the banalities of everyday life and the widest horizons of the cosmos (Berger, *Bento's Sketchbook*). Belonging is not exclusively

pinned to a singular point of origin in this world. It is not even tied to a transnational ideology. It is embedded in something that is wider and deeper. The horizons of view are open to the experience of the infinite and focused towards the production of a form that would in turn make it comprehensible. Aesthetic imagination is now given the scope to embrace the whole. Aesthesis starts with this kind of sensory awareness of the world. Jacques Rancière informs us that sensory awareness is always disciplined—the gaze towards the infinite may be universal but the way sensation is organized into meaning depends upon a system of interpretation. The belief that the meaning and beauty of the cosmos can be found in ordinary objects is he argues a product of the modern period that produced what he calls an "aesthetic regime" (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*).

Berger's writing does not offer such a neat explanation of the enclosure of the aesthetic within constructed frames. On the contrary, he provides instances of the work of the imagination that seem to leap across time and produce a strange historical modality. Berger invokes a mode of historical consciousness that defies the laws of linear causality, as it adopts a multi-causal contextual frame and a perspectival position that defies any fixed temporal location (*Here is Where We Meet* 129-142). To put it briefly, I will argue that throughout Berger's writing, we can trace the outline of a double claim on the historical modality of aesthetic imagination. It produces images that come out of history, but they are not bound by or the sum of specific historical forces. Imagination has a double perspective towards the images in its own historical context; it simultaneously reassembles elements that exist in a given period and it also reproduces them anew. This production of novelty is the point at which the chain of causality is broken and it is the gap through which surprise, wonder and freedom enters.

In the midst of cold war debates on art and politics, Berger asserted: "imagination is not, as it is sometimes thought, the ability to invent; it is the capacity to disclose that which exists" (*Permanent Red* 51). At this point in time, the revelatory function of the imagination was given a determinant role over all other dimensions. The duty of the artist was defined in terms of a pursuit of truth. Through this endeavor, solidarity and justice were also realized. Thus the virtue of art was understood in its capacity to deliver more virtuous forms of ethical conduct and express a transformative agenda of radical politics. Art was imbued with a strong corrective task: it was meant to clarify ambiguities, break out of restrictions, and overcome false hierarchies. Through art we could *see through* the distortions that blurred reality, blocked solidarity and delayed justice.

In the past decade, while these ethical commitments and political values have been reaffirmed, there has also been a stronger attention to aesthetics. Berger has neither retreated into an academic fascination with the aesthetic theory, nor adopted a position of mystical detachment. His attempt to articulate the visions of the world that are constructed by other artists is also an approach that makes his own sensory awareness of the world more explicit. By focusing on the manner in which art is

making a world as it represents the world, Berger is extending his understanding of the function of the imagination beyond an evaluation of its political objectives and ethical sincerity. His observations of the social and political conditions that are represented in the artwork are now more directly linked to ruminations on how a specific work of art is also expressive of a general vision of the world.

This process of rumination also gives greater credence to the use of sensory faculties for grasping the realm of what is possible in the world. From this perspective art not only reveals an existing truth but also provides the means for exploring new connections and wider resonances. For instance, in the late paintings by Cezanne, Berger describes the "complementarity between the equilibrium of the body and the inevitability of landscape" ("Paint it Black") by comparing his depiction of rocks in a forest to the intimacy of armpits. Berger sees these paintings as prophetic expressions about creation. The creation of the world appears in the sense of expectancy that comes from the minute interplay between the animate and inanimate. Berger claims that it is witnessed in Cezanne's ability to show how the air is "touching" the skin of a young man as he lies by a river, in the same way that his "Mont Saint Victoire in Provence is touched by the sunlight" ("Paint it Black"). Hence, the revelatory function of art has been complemented with a connective and harmonic version of aesthetics.

Many philosophers have wrestled with both this strange historical modality and the tension between sensory apprehension and the formal communication of knowledge. Perhaps the most eloquent expression of the way the past manifests itself in aesthetic imagination is found in Bachelard's phrasing of the flow of the distant past as "resounding with echoes", and its re-appearance being caused by its "brilliance" (xii). The transmission of the past, he argues, is secured by an ongoing radiance that appears to survive after the relevance of its content has faded. So this delightful prospect raises the question of how a critic can either catch the glow or be in the flow? Bachelard's instruction is very simple: adopt the same supple poise of openness that is evident in the artist's receptive position. Picking up these signals does not require the handling of a finely tuned instrument, or depend on the maneuvering of a predetermined category, but rather, it emanates from a state of mind that is receptive to the "very ecstasy of the newness of the image." For Bachelard, this process of reception and transmission can happen because he believes that the work of aesthetic creation can move from one soul to another (xi).

Roland Barthes also pondered over the mystery of artistic communication. He noted that literature could convey a level of meaning that exceeds the information that is provided in the text. He distinguished between what he called the "obvious meaning" that can be determined in a systematic manner, and the "obtuse meaning" that is "blunted, rounded in form" and eludes any of the manifest structures that are utilized in the text (Barthes 54). To grasp the sense of the obtuse meaning that emanates from the text he also suggested that critics must participate in the game of creation. In short, the critic must share the approach taken by the artist. This encounter makes them companions to the unforeseeable.

More recently, Peter Sloterdijk has explored the images of cosmic companionship in creation stories. The range of examples that Sloterdijk examines spread across the whole spectrum of creativity. They include stories that explain the emergence of the universe through the geometric form of the sphere, visions that identify the function of the breath as bridging heaven and earth, theories of human existence that demonstrate that "every social form has its own world house" (57), and then zooms into accounts of the "caring ecstasies [that] enclose mother and children in an amorous bell" (61). Throughout these diverse examples, Sloterdijk attempts to identify the unpredictable sources and explain the complex dynamics of imagination. The ideas always seem to come from elsewhere and the relationship tends to affirm a process of connection. Hence, Sloterdijk argues that creation draws on an aptitude for hospitality and transference.

Before addressing the relationship between cosmos and creation in Berger's texts, it is worth clearing up another assumption about aesthetic imagination and truth. Berger often argues that art produces a truth that the political and commercial advocates of globalization would either prefer to ignore, or fail to register (*Hold Everything Dear* 3). The status of the truth claim in the aesthetic imagination is not equivalent to conventional legal definitions, and it often exceeds the rational and empirical modes of verification. This ambiguity follows from the complex relationship between the image and its history, and the fact that it arises from the sensory faculties rather than through the procedural steps of reasoned thought. Hence, the axiom that the image comes before thought. This is not to be taken as an excuse to liberate the image from the scrutiny of critical thinking, but, rather, an acknowledgement that it occurs prior to and is, to an extent, independent of the confirmatory and validating frameworks of rationality. Hence, the relationship between image and truth is not confined to a revelatory process by which the image presents a pre-existent truth, but, rather, it serves to produce a re-alignment between the actual sensory awareness of the world and the available forms for understanding. The tension between the actual and the available is a constitutive force in the production of the image. New images come into the world because the available ways of seeing fail to give form to the actual world.

Berger's own accounts of how creative acts are interpreted have seemingly shifted from a form of strident and activist critique, to a more poetic and open-ended process of engagement. In the early period, from the 50s to the late 70s, he defined the role of the critic in rather combative terms, fighting the evil that oppresses people, and the task of the critic was to show how an artist's work can provide a deeper sense of human wholeness and an "expanded awareness of our potentiality" (Berger and McQueen 17). In his most recent essays, while his attention to the details of oppression has not lessened, there is nevertheless an attempt to address them in a wider framework of understanding. What has shifted is the widening of a framework that connects political details and the broader whole. This is not an entirely new step, but rather, it is a move from ideological critique towards the genre that gives more space to the sensory awareness of the actual world. It is a genre that resembles the mode

of writing that Taussig calls "fabulation" and Latour calls poetic writing. Reflecting on his own critical approach, Berger tells us that his attention is often captured by a 'living' detail and how this provides an entrance point into the wider "field" of the work (*About Looking*). However, in a later essay he reflects on his approach in a more enigmatic manner. He recounts a dream in which he was standing before a swinging door, but then teases us by stating that he "magically unremembered" how it opened (*The Shape of a Pocket* 13). These are tantalizing comments. They invoke the tension between the boundless whole and the grounded particular that recurs in all of Berger's reflexive statements on art. The organizing principle of creativity requires both human intimacy and a cosmic sweep. Berger does not shirk from their magnificent duty. In an essay on the double movement of creation, he concludes with the words of the Chinese painter Shitao: "the brush is for saving things from chaos" (*The Shape of a Pocket* 16).

Creation Stories as Companionship

A starting point for the exploration of creation can be found in Berger's famous phrase "ways of seeing". In the opening sentence to *Ways of Seeing*, Berger posited: "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it speaks" (7). This highlights the priority of sensory awareness to logos—the articulation of thought into language. However, it is the following passage that catapults us from the source of the senses to the widest frame, as he states that this aesthetic knowledge is the attempt "to establish our place in the surrounding world" (*Ways of Seeing* 7). Most of *Ways of Seeing* is a trenchant polemic against the restrictions that 'normalize' the modes of perception in capitalist societies. However, it also provides an evocation of the inherent potential to revitalize and expand our consciousness of the indivisible experience of being surrounded by the world. Considerable attention has been given to the polemical aspect of Berger's writing (e.g. MacIntyre; Caute; Robbins; Dyer); what I will focus on is the poetic awareness of the cosmos.

The phrase 'ways of seeing' usually refers to a 'patterned' mode of perception that reflects a personal inclination, a cultural disposition or at best a global consciousness. Amongst artist this pattern is expressed in a specific aesthetic form. It provides a reference point that coils its way throughout their life's work. This process of aesthetic reiteration is usually addressed as a consequence of psychological drives or as a persistent response to intractable social issues. It is presumed that the artist returns to this topos, or persists with a specific tropos, because the psyche has been locked into an obsessive and compulsive mode. Or else there is the view that the structures of social conflict are of such indomitable force that the artist cannot but help to keep coming back to confront social tensions. These two models would restrict the function of creativity as if it were a consequence of the individual's psychic make-up, or the confrontation with the inevitable forces of social inequality. I will suggest that

Berger's writing on art and creativity can be explored from another perspective. The third way would consider whether a 'way of seeing' is also expressive of the link between the artistic imaginary and cosmology. It would turn to face the way the visible order carries within it multiple dimensions and is open to new formations:

> Our customary visible order is not the only one: it coexists with other orders. Stories of fairies, sprites, ogres were a human attempt to come to terms with this co-existence. Hunters are continually aware of it and so can read signs we do not see. Children feel it intuitively because they have the habit of hiding behind things. There they discover the interstices between different sets of the visible. (Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket* 5)

In this passage from the collection of essays in 2001 called *The Shape of a Pocket*, he teases out the keen sensitivities and wide-eyed sensibilities that allow artists to find connections that we would normally gloss over in everyday life. However, the point of this evocation of co-existent sets of the visible is neither simply a reconnaissance mission of missing signs, nor an excavation of the ruined symbols that would otherwise disappear from the field of vision, but a more ambiguous gesture of registration of multiple and more supple ways of seeing. How do we mark out the features of this 'creative' way of seeing, and how is it connected to a way living with the world, and by this I mean not just the earth, but the cosmos as a whole?

Despite a lifetime of writing on artistic creativity and throughout the persistent reflections on the ontological bonds that link a person to the world, there is no explicit creation story in Berger's work. In his meditative book *And Our Faces, As Brief as Photos* (1984), he drew on Mircea Eliade's examination of the mythological accounts that posit a connection between a person, their ancestry, the home and the universe:

> Originally home meant the center of the world—not in a geographical, but in an ontological sense. Mircea Eliade has demonstrated how home was the place from which the world could be *founded*. A home was established, as he says, "at the heart of the real." In traditional societies, everything that made sense of the world was real; the surrounding chaos existed and was threatening, but it was threatening because it was *unreal*. Without a home at the center of the real, one was not only shelterless, but also lost in nonbeing, in unreality. Without a home everything was fragmentation.
> Home was the center of the world because it was the place where a vertical line crossed with a horizontal one. The vertical line was a path leading upwards to the sky and downwards to the underworld. The horizontal line represented the traffic of the world, all the possible roads leading across the earth to other places. Thus, at home, one was nearest to the gods in the sky and to the dead of the underworld. This nearness promised access to both. And at the same time, one was at the starting point and, hopefully, the returning point of all terrestrial journeys. (*And Our Faces* 55-56)

The intersection between the vertical and horizontal axes is, for Berger, the nexus at which meaning both arises and is secured. It is simultaneously a confirmation point and a platform for critical self-understanding. This is crucial conjunction. While Berger rejects the simplistic modern tales that equate individual freedom with leaving home, he is also not proclaiming that ancient cultural values are static. What is at stake is a more complex negotiation between the vicissitudes of an individual's life

history and the wisdom that is condensed into cultural values. Rather than rejecting traditional cultures as being mired in superstition and bound by oppressive hierarchies, Berger is more concerned in exploring the ways they provide a source of knowledge that can furnish contemporary guidance and understanding. In the more recent collection of essays on art and the politics of resistance, *Hold Everything Dear* (2007), Berger recalls a gesture of consolation from the Islamic tradition:

> A small brass bowl called a Fear Cup. Engraved with filigree geometric patterns and some verses from the Koran arranged in the form of a flower. Fill it with water and leave it outside under the stars for a night. Then drink the water whilst praying that it will alleviate the pain and cure you. For many sicknesses the Fear Cup is clearly less effective than a course of antibiotics. But a bowl of water which has reflected the time of the stars, the same water from which every living thing was made, as is said in the Koran, may help resist the stranglehold. (*Hold Everything Dear* 73)

The strength of this sentimental gesture is that it establishes water as the conductor of the universe's life force. While antibiotics can cure by eliminating some harmful bacteria, it is water that is adopted as the medium that connects the individual with the universe. Berger claims that this symbolic act of union provides a sense of release from the crippling feeling of helplessness and insignificance. It takes away the pain of feeling isolated. Towards the end of the book he quotes from the Caribbean cultural theorist Edouard Glissant, who argues that "the way to resist globalization is…to imagine what is the first sum of all possible particularities and to get used to the idea that, as long as a single particularity is missing, globality will not be what it should be for us" (qtd. in *Hold Everything Dear* 117). He then adds quotations from Emily Dickinson, Spinoza and contemporary resistance fighters that both express wonder at the ever-present manifestation of the eternal and compare the freedom gained from the overthrow of tyranny to the reclamation of the power to create the world anew (*Hold Everything Dear* 119).

Some common elements and a recurring structure can be found in these stories. They contain a common pathway that moves from isolation to connection, and promote a political view on equality and freedom that includes the sense of wonder. Cross-cutting these narratives of social solidarity and political emancipation is the work of imagination. From these stories we can see how the source and frame of creativity is presented not just in terms of its outcomes, such as its capacity to give new form to the meaning of either an object or a relationship with others in the world, but it is also intimated that it is drawn from a desire for companionship.

Companionship is at the heart of Berger's evocation of creation. It is of note that when Berger turns to Michelangelo and acknowledges that he was a figure that "assumed at the very last possible historical moment—the Renaissance role of the artist as supreme creator" (*The Shape of a Pocket* 98), his focus is not on the majesty of formal compositions, for this would be akin to staring at the finger when God was pointing to the light, but on the perverse conjuring of the very act of creation. For Michelangelo, this creation story was itself a manifestation of a creation fantasy.

Staring up at the Sistine Chapel, Berger notices that this male artist assumed the ability of giving birth:

> The whole ceiling is really about Creation and for him, in the last coil of his longing, Creation meant everything imaginable being born, thrusting and flying from between men's legs. (*The Shape of a Pocket* 99)

The point of creation for Berger is not just the production of a pure idea that can acquire material form, or the discovery of a source from which growth proceeds, but is expressive of a desire for companionship. For the generation of art critics that preceded Berger, such as Herbert Read and Kenneth Clark, the idea of the artist as Promethean creator was a given. Johan Herder, one of Read's favorite philosophers, claimed that the artist is a "sacred vessel through which blows the spirit of his time and place and society; he is the man who conveys as far as possible a total human experience, a world" (qtd. in Read, *Art and Society* iv). Read himself would be even more bold in his claims about the function as a mediator in divine creation: "an artist for the community's sake becomes priest and king, for he is the maker of magic, the voice of the spirits, the inspired oracle, the intermediary through whom the tribe secures fertility for their crops for their hunters. His hand is veritably the hand of God" (Read, *Art Now* 34). One of the primary functions of *Ways of Seeing* was to establish an alternative frame for interpreting the 'mysterious forms' of art, and providing a more grounded approach for evaluating the agency of the artist. While not confining himself to the crisp air of empiricism, Berger was, like Walter Benjamin, suspicious of whatever "lurks in the humid backroom of spiritualism" (Benjamin 178). Hence, in a later essay Berger makes explicit his rejection of the illusion that the artist stands above society, draws on mystical forces and creates new forms with divine authority (Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket* 18). Berger insists that there is no real autogenesis in art. He sees artists as "receivers" and beneficiaries of signs being sent to them. Creation comes from the artist's ability to give form to what he has received. Hence, if creativity seeks companionship with the universe, then it begins in the process of collaboration.

Collaboration and Place

In the past decade Berger has given greater focus to the process of collaboration. He notes that in artistic collaboration everything is active. Each subject, even the one's sitting while they are being drawn, are "participating in giving". The minimum that they generate is the "need for recognition" and Berger notes that the "artist must search for this form". The exchange occurs at a junction between the artist's quest and the subject's giving over of their "waiting-to-be-seen" (*The Shape of a Pocket* 75). Both the artist and the subject are engaged in a form of surrender of the sovereign self, that is akin to what Greek theologians described as kenosis—an emptying out of

the self in order to achieve companionship with the other. By giving in and making space to receive the energy of the other, there is a process by which Berger claims that the subject's body falls away and the artist is overtaken by the collaboration:

> The imaginative movement which prompts the impulse to draw…repeats…a symbiotic desire to get closer and closer, to enter the self of what is being drawn, and, simultaneously, there is the foreknowledge of immanent distance. Such drawings aspire to be both a secret rendezvous and an au revoir! (Berger, *Bento's Sketchbook* 156)

This conception of creation that is defined through the dynamics of collaboration and heads towards the experience of companionship is complicated when you consider the metaphorical evocation of the artist's studio. The artist's studio, now that it is almost extinct, is a site that has captivated art historians. Critical attention is often directed towards its contents, order and location, as if this data provides a golden key for explaining the artist's work. In an exchange of letters with the artist Leon Kossoff, Berger distances himself from the more elevated views that compare the studio to an observatory and opts for the metaphor of the "stomach". He suggests that it is a "place of digestion, transformation and excretion. Where images change form. Where everything is both regular and unpredictable. Where there is no apparent order and from where a well-being comes" (*The Shape of a Pocket* 71). Similarly, in his recollection of Brancusi's studio, he thinks of it as a "bakery" (*The Shape of a Pocket* 123). When you connect these gustatory images of the site of the studio with the agency of the artist as a collaborator it strengthens the claim that creation is a complex interplay between the activity of reception and the re-configuring of existing elements. Berger also observes that experience of working in the studio induces the feeling of "well-being". I will return to this observation of the co-relation between novelty and satisfaction. However, at this point I would also like to stress that creation is not just a translation, in its more limited application of carrying one meaning into another field, but also a production of something out of nothing, or to put it in Castoriadis's terms: creativity comes *ex-nihilo*.

In Leon Kosoff's reply, he makes explicit the relationship between creativity, the void. He agrees with Berger that artist receives the subject like a 'good host' but then adds that collaboration produces a dual movement, leading to both a surprising self-extension and a humbling self-effacing:

> 'Thereness' follows nothingness. It is impossible to premeditate. It is to do with collaboration of the sitter, as you say, but also to do with the disappearance of the sitter the moment the image emerges. (Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket* 78)

The disappearance of the subject also allows for the reiteration of a quality that is fundamental and continuous with an artist's practice. Throughout an artist's work Berger claims that there is an underlying but illusive theme, "a kind of hidden but continuous subject" (Berger and McQueen 62). This quality recurs like fingerprints, but since it lacks overt characteristics, it also defies classification. At one point Berger defines this quality as a sense of place. This is consistent with an enduring belief

that art provides a response to a primal exile, a struggle between the infinity of the cosmos and the emptiness of the void, and is part of a collective effort to give meaning to existence. Hence he claims that the function of art is comparable to the need to distinguish a place from the boundlessness of space:

> Place is more than area. A place surrounds something. A place is the extension of a presence or the consequence of an action. A place is the opposite of an empty space. A place is where an event has taken or is taking place. (Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket* 28-9)

This idea of place as an active zone is comparable to the ideas proposed in sociology and cultural geography (de Certeau). However, Berger is not simply making the point that the territory is an active force in the construction of spatial meaning and a dynamic partner in the poetics of everyday life, he is also seeking to find a vocabulary for the condition that makes an image leap out of its own specific circumstances. In a much earlier essay he stated that "every convincing painting makes a spatial system of its own" (Berger, *About Looking* 80). This emphasis on art as place-making activity is also evident in his numerous essays on photography where he commented that the status of photograph's meaning shifts from a private to public meaning. He also claims that when we look at photographs we often adopt the viewpoint of a stranger. The stranger's capacity to relate to an image is not confined to identifying the context and topography that is represented in the photograph or the painting, but rather comes from a more ambiguous process of discerning a feeling of spatial companionship. The place becomes activated for a stranger when they start to feel that they too have been in a place like that. This place is not deduced by any formal set of perspectival rules, nor is it locatable through the content of a cultural code. In relation to the sense of place in painting, Berger suggests that the experience of recognition is paradoxical: it is not dependent on any overt physical markers, and yet it is the organizing point from which the painting's energy commences:

> The painter is continually trying to discover, to stumble upon, the place which will contain and surround his present act of painting. Ideally there should be as many places as there are paintings. The trouble is that a painting often fails to become a place.… When a place is found it is found somewhere on the frontier between nature and art. It is like a hollow in the sand within which the frontier has been wiped out. The place of the painting begins in this hollow. Begins with a practice, with something being done by the hands, and the hands then seeking approval of the eye, until the whole body is involved in the hollow. (Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket* 28-9)

Berger acknowledges that this revelation of place is rare. When it is achieved it has the effect of doubling back on the subject that disappeared in order to enable the image to form. When Berger tries to outline the "outcome" of a story, he produces an equally meandering assessment of the storyteller's unique sense of direction and the topography constituted in the story. He stresses that the key is not just in the specific details that captivate a storyteller's attention but also in the rhythm of this mode of pondering and lingering. He then compares this form of narrative movement to a

dancer and suggests that we should read into each step the expectations and memories of a lived life:

> Throughout the story we become accustomed to the storyteller's particular procedure of bestowing attention, and of then making a certain sense of what was at first glace chaotic. We begin to acquire his storytelling habits. And if the story has impressed us, something of these habits, something of its way of giving attention, will remain with us and become our own. We will then apply it to the chaos of ongoing life, in which multitudes of stories are hidden. This inheritance is what I mean by a story's *outcome*. Every storyteller has her or his own procedure. No two are alike. (Berger, *Bento's Sketchbook* 72)

At an earlier point in his writing he was describing this condition through the term "truth" (*About Looking* 134). In the essays on Millet, Courbet and Ahmet there is an exploration of three distinct struggles with the language of painting to reveal the truth of their subject. The idea of a truth is wider than any external force. It is constituted in the paradoxical combination of a worldly awareness and a singular vision that is validated in each artistic expression. For instance, Millet chose the life of the peasant as his central subject and his "life effort was to do him justice by investing him with dignity and permanence" (*About Looking* 75). Millet believed that realism would open the door to oil painting and admit a subject that it previously ignored. However, Berger concluded that Millet failed to find such a revolutionary accommodation between his subject and his genre. One repelled the other, and as a consequence the figure of the peasant does not look like she 'belongs' in the very landscape she labors and lives. This failure, he insists, is not due to Millet's shortcoming as an artist, or in his lack of sensitivity to his subject, but rather due to his temerity and reluctance to destroy "the traditional language for depicting scenic landscape" (Berger, *About Looking* 77).

By contrast, in the paintings by Courbet and Ahmet, something more palpable is discovered. Berger begins his essay on Courbet with the artist's maxim: "art is the most complete expression of an existing thing" (134). It is the word "expression" that captures Berger's attention and led him to reflect on the parallels between the harsh, rocky and dark landscape of the Jura in which Courbet worked, and the severe, direct and non-sentimental manner of his paintings. Courbet did not paint the landscape in the manner that art history had determined it 'should' appear. He did not seek to enoble his subjects by elevating them from their actual conditions. Just as the appearance of rocks "are only weakly normative", Courbet stripped back any sentimentality, and thereby refused to either idealize conditions or perpetuate the pre-established norms. The consequence of this is, according to Berger, a revelation of a truth that the dominant social willfully refused to see. Courbet had released himself from the role of moderating appearance and gone deeper into the expression of the existent.

Ahmet also produced a landscape painting that defied pictorial conventions. In this case, Berger observed the co-existence of both Western perspectival rendering and Islamic miniaturism. However, rather producing a discordant collision, this combi-

nation lures the viewer's gaze into a rocking manoeuvre. The subject is doubled. One looks at the tree at the edge of the painting and the woodcutter at the bottom who is entering into the forest. The effect for Berger is that it transforms the conditions of spectatorship. The subject no longer appears before or in front of it, but is *in* it. This pictorial innovation matches Heidegger's attempt to the describe one's active presence in the world that is at once bounded by the horizon but also open, and which he defined as the process of "coming-into-the-nearness of distance." For Berger, the truth of Ahmet's painting lay in the folds between different cultural perspectives.

What is significant about the function of the term 'truth' in these critical essays is that it provides a lens for seeing the way artists succeed or fail in constituting a worldview. Berger is clear that his role as a critic is not to offer an absolute explanation, or even situate the artist's work in a specific historical context. The focus on the constitution of a truth, or the idea of a place, both serve to understand the way an artist engages in an utterly personal and simultaneously trans-historical worldview. This idea of truth is complex. Berger suggests that the pursuit of truth functions as an organizing principle in the order of a person's life. He notes that it is related to a kind of purity that motivates love, inspires sincerity and sustains endurance. This thematic recurs in a recent collection of essays that combine autobiography, imaginative portrayal of cities and tender observation of the trace of beloved friends. While describing a priest's capacity to recognize the love that he sees in a marriage, Berger also offers an analogy to the work of critic. For the priest, purity appears in the "web of calculation, desire, fear, bribes and love" which is part of a marriage contract. These are the obvious points that bind a couple. However, Berger also notes that in this instance, the priest is looking for is something else that is there but more "obtuse" and which must be enticed in order to come out of its hiding, and even when it is "disclosed, (it) invariably goes back into hiding" (Berger, *Here is Where We Meet* 210-11).

Conclusion: An Image of the Cosmos

In his early writings, Berger was more concerned with examining the kind of worldview that is represented in the artwork and its potential to contribute toward human emancipation. In his more recent writing, the political objectives have not altered but the perspective has widened to include the processes of subjectivity in collaboration and the sensory awareness of place in the creation of a worldview. He recounts a dream in which he sees himself as a "dealer of appearances", and confesses that the secret is to "get inside" and "re-arrange" things, as one would if we were occupying a furnished apartment (*The Shape of a Pocket* 13). It is worth recalling that the etymology of cosmos also contains the art of decorating and giving an order to the things of the world.

The founding act of self-effacement now swings open towards the condition for

hospitality. The function of place is "to welcome the absent" (*The Shape of a Pocket* 32). By doubling back it also leaps up as the generative and life affirming force of creation as it produces "a part…of what begins again and again" (*The Shape of a Pocket* 32). Place, therefore, serves an ordering activity. However, the purpose of this ordering is not the establishment of a segmented hierarchy but an assembly that intimates cosmic unity. Note carefully how Berger's conclusion to an essay on Edgar Degas finds a harmonic union between the particular and the universal and then brings it back to the absolute recognition that a mother has for her child: "Watching the woman standing on one leg and drying her foot, we are happy for what has been recognized and admitted. We feel the existent recalling its own Creation, before there was any fatigue…Do we not all dream of being known, known by our backs, legs, buttocks, shoulders, elbows, hairs?…just nakedly known. Known as a child is by its mother" (*The Shape of a Pocket* 68). This is the same point that Berger also made two decades earlier when he described August Sander's photographic method as "translucently documentary" (*About Looking* 27). Berger zoomed into Sander's portrayal of the universal in the detail of the ordinary by reiterating Walter Benjamin's appraisal: "It was indeed unprejudiced observation, bold and at the same time delicate, very much in the spirit of Goethe's remark; 'There is a delicate mode of the empirical which identifies itself so intimately with its object that it thereby becomes theory'" (Berger, *About Looking* 28). These cosmological connections between the "silent eternity" and the "space of the world" are now the subject of considerable theoretical scrutiny. Rancière has observed that the very formation of what he calls the aesthetic regime that, which he claims was exemplified by Gustave Flaubert and Stéphane Mallarme, is the point at which in aesthetic terms "anything at all can be beautiful, on condition that it gives rise to the presence of the infinite, that is, of its own nothingness" (Rancière, *Mallarme* 19).

How close is this companionship between the empirical and the theoretical? Does one merge into the other? Does the host receive the guest by emptying out herself and then recover identity by catching an image that speaks of their fleeting union? And what do we make of the claim that the site where all this happens, the studio, also exudes a sense of well-being? Is this the satisfaction of good craftsmanship, or does this simple pleasure also speak to a deeper eros—the union with the ineffable and the eternal? All these questions rest on a worldview that is as celestial as it is terrestrial, and on a conception of the role of the artist as interrogator of the enigma of existence. For Berger, heaven is imagined as "invisible, unenterable but intimately close" (*The Shape of a Pocket* 11). This image of heaven is not an other world, but an ambient sphere that is as infinite as the cosmic horizon and as ubiquitous as a "pebble or a salt-cellar on the table". Here again we find an affinity with Gaston Bachelard's reflection on the cosmos, not as an external phenomenon or an object that requires contemplation, but as an impression of immensity that already exists within ourselves (Bachelard 198). It also accords with Peter Sloterdijk's neat summation of the metaphysical definition of the cosmos as:

> a totality of warmth and meaning, as the largest possible unity of the ensouled, as a concentrically built whole with a marked domestic character, or as an ideal first abode for intelligent beings. (Sloterdijk and Heinrichs 213)

Following the big bang of Creation, arises what Greek philosophers called *anangki*—the struggle of living with necessity. These ancient terms—cosmos, creation, truth, place, necessity—still speak to fundamental and inescapable questions that haunt modernity. The fact that they are not part of the conventional discourse on art does not make Berger balk, nor does he believe that artists have deflected their gaze away from the fundamental challenges that are encapsulated by these ancient terms. My point in teasing out a cosmological perspective in Berger's writing is neither to reinstate the old metaphysics, nor to elevate artists as mediators between this world and the divine cosmos. For I agree with Berger: the relevance and value in turning to the example of an artist's work is that it offers the widest instance of the quest for meaning, and I also think that sometimes a good dose of antibiotics is better than praying to the invisible god that protects you from bacteria. The strong universalism of the old metaphysics is no longer intact. What is now necessary is a different kind of universalism. It needs to be more down to earth but also capable of both capturing the complexities that lay in the subtle details and immersing itself in the infinite. This is not simply a matter of reintegrating the figure of God into the science and art of the everyday, but rather it requires an openness to the creativity that connect our little gestures to the vast cosmos.

Berger's early work adopted an internationalist perspective on art and politics that was closely affiliated to the new left. In this robust vision there was a cosmopolitan vision that was embedded in an anti-colonial and transnational revolutionary ideology. However, Berger also confessed to being both a "bad Marxist" in that he had an aversion to power, and a "romantic" who upheld the capacity for subjective intuitions to keep him open to the mysteries of art, love and the universe ("Ways of Witnessing" 37-8). The interplay between this overt political stance and implicit subjective union with others has taken new dimensions in his recent writings on art. It has led to a cosmopolitan imaginary that combines a celestial and terrestrial sense of unity. This perspective brings us to what I believe is the core question in Berger's work. In what ways do we belong to the world?

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