John Berger obituary

Critic whose TV series Ways of Seeing posed questions about art and society, and a writer whose fiction reflected his life in rural France

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The art critic, essayist and novelist John Berger threw down his challenge early in his television series Ways of Seeing. This came in 1972, the year when Berger, who has died aged 90, broke through to real fame from his niche celebrity on the arts pages of the New Statesman. *Ways of Seeing*, made on the cheap for the BBC as four half-hour programmes, was the first series of its kind since Civilisation (1969), 13 one-hour episodes for which Kenneth Clark, its writer and presenter, and a BBC production team had travelled 80,000 miles through 13 countries exploring 2,000 years of the visual culture of the western world. Berger travelled as far as the hut in Ealing, west London where his programmes were filmed, and no farther. What he said in his characteristic tone of sweet reasonableness was:

"In his book on the nude, Kenneth Clark says that being naked is simply being without clothes. The nude, according to him, is a form of art. I would put it differently: to be naked is to be oneself; to be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognised for oneself. A nude has to be seen as an object in order to be a nude."

In other words, art is a commodity and a woman in art is an object. No approach to art could have been more different from Clark's gentlemanly urbanity. These demotic programmes turned Berger into the hero of a generation studying the burgeoning new university courses on European visual culture. The spin-off book was never out of print. Clark, meanwhile, found himself derided as Lord Clark of Civilisation.

Ways of Seeing was Berger's apotheosis as a populariser, but in this year too he won the Booker prize, the James Tait Black Memorial prize and the Guardian Fiction prize with his novel G, and also published, with his frequent collaborator the photographer Jean Mohr, *A Fortunate Man*, a sensitive documentary account of a country doctor on his daily round in Gloucestershire. These three

books began to sketch out the areas of Berger's lifetime enterprise.

They were preceded by the publication of *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (1965) and *Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny and the Role of the Artist in the USSR* (1969); in one, he made a hopeless mess of Picasso's later career, though he was not alone in this; in the other, he elevated a brave dissident artist beyond his talents.

The success and failure of John Berger was not predictable for a boy born in Stoke Newington, north London, into a prosperous middle-class family, even though his mother, Miriam (nee Branson), had been born in working-class Bermondsey. His father, Stanley Berger, had wanted to be a priest, but while serving on the front in the first world war he lost his faith and won an MC, to which in peacetime he added being appointed OBE for his pioneering work in business cost accounting.

He left St Edward's school, Oxford, at 16 to study at the Central School of Art; his course was interrupted in 1944 when he was called up and posted to a Belfast training depot, where he served as a lance-corporal in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. It was his first day-by-day encounter with the working classes and it shaped his politics for life.
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On demob, Berger continued his education at Chelsea School of Art (1945-47). In 2002 a Barbican Gallery exhibition devoted to the 1950s London art scene included an

unremarkable Berger painting of scaffolding on the South Bank site for the Festival of Britain, but when I interviewed Berger for the publication of the stories collected in *Pig Earth* in 1979 he pointed out on the walls of his mother's well-appointed flat near Regent's Park a couple of his paintings of peasants at work, a kind of stylised realism not far from the approach of the Italian realist Renato Guttuso, about whom Berger would later write extensively. The pictures clearly showed that he might have made some kind of a career in painting, though fortune was smiling on him when he chose to write instead.

After college he taught drawing at St Mary's teacher training college at Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, southwest London, continued to paint, and exhibited his work at the Leicester, Redfern and Wildenstein galleries. It was not until a friend invited him to give a series of talks on art for the BBC World Service that he found his feet. In 1952, he showed the scripts for a couple of his broadcasts to TC Worsley, literary editor of the New Statesman, and began a 10-year stretch as a controversial and highly influential art critic for the journal, often singling out for praise an artist nobody else had heard of. This who he? element became a regular feature of his writings, but never seems to have damaged his reputation.

His first published collection of essays in 1960 was mostly drawn from his New Statesman reviews. He called it after the artist's colour option Permanent Red (pun intended: his US publishers pointedly retitled the book Toward Reality: Essays in Seeing). In it, magisterially, he categorised artists under chapter headings such as Artists Defeated by the Difficulties and Artists Who Struggle. The first category included Jackson Pollock – an unconvincing essay in which he could not quite bring himself to write the artist off though he did assign to his work the dreaded description "decorative" – Naum Gabo, Paul Klee, Jean Dubuffet and – which dates the collection – John Bratby. The second, containing implicitly greater artists, included Henry Moore, Ceri Richards, David Bomberg, George Fullard and Friso ten Holt, a Dutchman who remained doggedly obscure despite Berger's advocacy.

An essay in *Permanent Red headed Who Is an Artist?* imagines the thought processes of an artist lying under a beech tree and assessing shapes, light, space and volume: prefacing all the argumentative pieces about the role of art in society, it briefly indicates why Berger was a successful and popular teacher and how perceptive he could have been as a critic had he not been so prescriptive.

Although Berger's emergence as television's populist sage in Ways of Seeing was a throwback to the dogmatism of Permanent Red, it was an extraordinary trick to have pulled off. A running theme was that portable oil paintings came at the right time in the growth of capitalism to be used for publicity and propaganda, a use vastly expanded with the invention of photography. The Guardian art critic of the time, Norbert Lynton, wrote bluntly: "I often cannot believe Berger … it is clear from his writings that he is a sensitive man and in many ways a wise one, and that he is willing to lie about art to make his political points."

"Lie" may be a bit strong, but in his early days Marxist dialectic did force him into uncomfortable contortions. Lynton may, to take one example, have been thinking of what Berger had to say about the analysis of Frans Hals's two last paintings by the scholar of Netherlands art Seymour Slive. Slive closely shows how the paintings work technically as group portraits of the governors and governesses of the Haarlem almshouses where the impoverished Hals himself received charity; but Berger says of Slive's analysis, "It's as though the author wants to mask the images, as though he fears their directness and accessibility."

However prone Slive may be to an art historian's preference for painterly values over social discourse, his analysis is nevertheless closer to the heart of the matter than Berger's fanciful account of a kind of class stand-off between the destitute artist and the governors, not least because on another and more likely reading, given Hals's approach to portraiture even of men and women in their prime, these two groups are painted with compassion but above all with a sharp eye for laying down what was before him.

Though Berger never specifically recanted, he did later admit that *Ways of Seeing* was too rushed and crude, and that he had not allowed for the genius factor. All the same, if urgency and clarity were at this stage Berger's great virtues as a writer, as a television performer he also brought warmth and an engagingly persuasive personality to bear.

It is inevitable that this huge success remains the main element of Berger's career, but his more impressive work

was rooted in his life-changing decision in 1962 to abandon England as his home and settle in a remote peasant community at Quincy in the Haute-Savoie. The intellectual climate of England was too unserious for him.

Visitors to Berger noticed how the villagers took to him and his family as easily as he had to them. The outcast in his native London had come home. Here Berger's remote situation allowed him the time and serenity to stitch his writing into a seamless garment fitting to the village life in which he helped whenever extra hands were needed, at harvest time or with animal husbandry.

He had already published his first novel, *A Painter of Our Time*, in 1958. The painter of the title is a Hungarian refugee from fascism who, just as he achieves a great success in London, returns to Budapest to take part in the 1956 uprising against Soviet domination and is not heard of again. This is a satisfying tale of personal and artistic integrity, though the painter has uncannily similar views to the author's own much bruited opinions on life and art.

Berger followed this with two less successful novels, *The Foot of Clive* (1962) and *Corker's Freedom* (1964), before *G*, with its three prizes in 1972. Guests at the lunch for the Guardian award held their breath: at the Booker award a few days earlier Berger had attacked the sponsors for exploitation of their Caribbean workforce, and announced that he would be giving half the prize to the Black Panthers, the revolutionary movement. The Guardian's editor, Alastair Hetherington, said in his speech that he would double the prize money (admittedly small to start with) if Berger would give half of it to a constructive cause rather than the obviously destructive Black Panthers. Berger turned away wrath with a smile, and with warmth and grace accepted the Guardian cheque.

Yet *G* is a not just a powerful book, it is powerfully flawed as well. It is an experimental novel at a time when experiment was the norm, influenced by the French nouveau roman. The structure, with its lumpen authorial interpolations, is painting by numbers: here is one of many possible examples from early in the novel when the rich father of the hero is speaking of his journey through the Alps to be reunited with his mistress (whom he addresses as a sparrow):

"'Ah! Laura. To think that I came under those mountains, the tunnel is fifteen kilometres long, fifteen. It is a marvel ... And on this side of the mountain, passeretta mia, you are waiting for me.'

"(The St Gothard tunnel was opened in 1882. Eight hundred men lost their lives in its construction.)"

Cervantes had made this sort of writer's intervention with a better and lighter touch 400 years earlier.

Nevertheless, it seemed that Berger had found his vocation as novelist, playwright, screenwriter and (much less known) poet of simplicity and lucidity – enough verse to put together in a *Collected Poems* (2014). The half of the Booker money that he didn't give to the Black Panthers he spent on putting together, with Mohr again, a book called *A Seventh Man* (1975). It was more ambitious than A Fortunate Man, an attempt to describe in verse, fiction, reportage, photographs and readymade images the lives of Europe's 22 million migrant workers. The modernist method that marred G worked much better in this media montage, and it was received with acclaim.

His first peasant work of fiction – or storytelling, as from his adopted peasant way of life he preferred to call it – was *Pig Earth*, produced in 1979 by Writers and Readers, a publishing co-operative that Berger helped to set up and finance. It was a collection of tales developed from the talk of his fellow villagers, seemingly as close to the lives of these peasants and their animals as their own skins. It concluded with three stories about the murder of Lucie Cabrol and her presence after death in the community. Simon McBurney and Mark Wheatley adapted them into a play, The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol: when the Complicite company took it to the Shaftesbury theatre, the Guardian critic Michael Billington described the production as "one of the supreme theatrical experiences in all London".

His next two books, *Once in Europa* (1987) and *Lilac and Flag* (1990), were each a collection of discrete stories accumulating into a novel, and were brought together with *Pig Earth* in a trilogy published as *Into Their Labours* (1992). Three years later he published *To the Wedding* and gave all his royalties to the London Lighthouse, an organisation supporting the victims of Aids.

Though he never admitted it publicly, the writing of this novel was prompted by the death of his daughter-

in-law from an Aids-related virus. The book is a remarkable achievement in which the sequences covering many years and several countries mesh effortlessly into a lucid yet almost visionary tale of a young footloose and fancy-free woman, Ninon, who is dying of Aids after a casual sexual encounter on a beach. She later falls in love with a man who, regardless, decides to marry her. The account mixes the method of magic fiction and a Greek chorus – a blind seller of little metal religous votive plaques, tamata, who has the power to zoom in on the lives of the other characters – with lyrical descriptions of Ninon's fancy-free life and sharp cinematic cuts between brief sequences describing the journey of her mother from Austria and her father (Berger's motorbike-riding doppelgänger) from France to Ninon's wedding in the village church of Gorino in the delta of the river Po.

With this book Berger arrived at a mastery that he displayed again in *Photocopies* (1996), a collection of encounters with real and imagined characters, and later books. He continued to write about art, but related it more closely to his personal experience, and though he never ceased to believe in the perfectibility of society, he edged towards an understanding of Marxism as an analytical tool rather than an infallible cure for the ills of the world.

His first marriage, to the artist and illustrator Pat Marriott in 1949, ended in divorce. His second marriage, in the mid-1950s, was to the Russian Anya Bostock (nee Anna Sisserman); they split up in the mid-1990s. Soon after he married for a third time, to the American Beverly Bancroft, who worked with the British Library on its acquisition of the Berger archive, now open to the public. Beverly died in 2013.

Last year saw the premiere in Berlin of the film *The Seasons in Quincy: Four Portraits of John Berger*, directed by Tilda Swinton, Colin McCabe, Christopher Roth and Bartek Dziadosz, and the publication of *Confabulations*, a miscellany of essays and drawings. At the end of his life Berger lived in the Paris suburb of Antony.

He is survived by his three children. Katya, a writer, and Jacob, a film director, came from his marriage to Anya. From that to Beverly he had another son, Yves, an artist and writer, who collaborated with him on the book *Rondo: Une Élégie pour Beverly* (2015).