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Book Review

Martin A. Berger. *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. ISBN 0-520-24459-1.

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Sight Unseen, as Martin Berger tells us, explores the links between racial identification and vision, probing the role of European-American whiteness in the form and meaning of the visual arts during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His purpose is to trace how European-Americans internalized historically specific ideologies linked to whiteness, how such ideologies were "expressed by and impressed on" visual texts, and what the implications of those texts were for both white and nonwhite peoples. First, Berger discusses the role of race in culture and in the visual arts as an extension of culture; second, and more importantly, he uses a new discourse to "read" art.

He explains and lists the contents and shortcomings of the two main approaches to reading a cultural artifact: the formalist and the contextual. In pointing out their deficiencies, he clearly lays out his own methodology on how to read artifacts. He writes, "My approach to visual analysis sees meaning shaped by the complex interaction of discourses--those that circulate invisibly in the common culture, others prompted by general themes of an artwork [*sic*], and those arising from the unique properties of the work." (p.24) Berger is not only interested in the apparent meanings encoded in the visual text by the artist, which are then read through dominant cultural discourses which shape the audience's perspectives, but also in the secondary, peripheral discourses that might point to what an artwork means. He wants to explore the intersection between those invisible discourses propagated through the agency of people, and specific discourses surrounding artworks. He argues that it is this interaction that may very well lead to the previously unseen meaning of an artwork, or "how meaning is produced."

Even in works that contain no nonwhite figures, Berger maintains, the morality of racial concern applies. He suggests early in the book that race is not simply biological or structured by society, but is a political and moral issue. Especially in his analysis of William Sydney Mount's paintings, particularly the ones without nonwhite figures, he emphasizes the fact that white audiences (European-American is the term he prefers) somehow read the works in positive terms even when they depict a legally or morally unacceptable action, for example a robbery. Whiteness consists of historical, political, and social meanings which are

normalized, accepted by society as natural and unbiased. It has been long thought, for example, that "whiteness" is virtually synonymous with "Americanness."

What is read through these works actually identifies what whiteness is all about, how it has been constructed and reconstructed through time, how it is internalized. If the central figure in an artwork is nonwhite and, let's say, resting on a farm while surrounded by European-American figures, he is associated with "sloth"—not, mind you, laziness or idleness but sloth, one of Christianity's seven deadly sins. But in another work ("Boys Caught Napping in a Field"), which depicts exclusively white figures in more or less the same positions as those in the previous painting, the work's readers have used phrases such as "cherishing the idleness of youth." Why are white youths to be cherished in their idleness while the young black male in "Farmer's Nooning" is accused of sloth? This is a case in point of a reading that Berger describes as crucial to understanding whiteness, not only in its denotations but in its connotations. He argues that with or without nonwhite figures, with or without apparent racial symbols in the work, the readings of the work still constitute, through such connotations, a meaning attached to race.

It is in fact the so-called "lacking in racial implications" moment itself that is important in constructing the connotation of race; here as whiteness. Even without the presence of a nonwhite figure, racial implications are so deeply engraved in a work, or in the reading of a work, that one cannot escape its racial content. Making his concern about "race" clear, he is aware that he might be falling into the category of structuralism; however, his aim is to outline whiteness, which is a refreshing approach to racial readings, since race is usually associated with nonwhites. It is about time that scholars consider how whiteness is constructed and assumed to be self-evident. This book is an important contribution to the study of whiteness and its implications as a racial category. Why should anything white be internalized as "normal"? Why should nonwhite figures in a text suggest a racial content? By using the jargon of literary theory, Berger contributes his own methodology to the perception and analysis of a visual text. He demonstrates clearly that racial (not racist) content, with or without the presence of a nonwhite figure, is manifested through invisible links to a shared ideology.

The interdisciplinary methodology and accessible language of *Sight Unseen* make it an approachable and valuable book. It will be a mind-opening tool not only for art students, but for anyone interested in discovering the constructions, depictions, and reconstructions of race in visual artifacts, from paintings to films to landscape photography.