Ways of Seeing Books

Richard Hollis

Exactly sixty years ago, a series of meetings took place in Chicago to discuss 'the arts in relation to the book', out of which came the book *Graphic Forms* (Harvard University Press, 1949). Echoing the views of his pioneering friend Lázló Moholy-Nagy, the book's main contributor, Gyorgy Kepes, proposed that the designer:

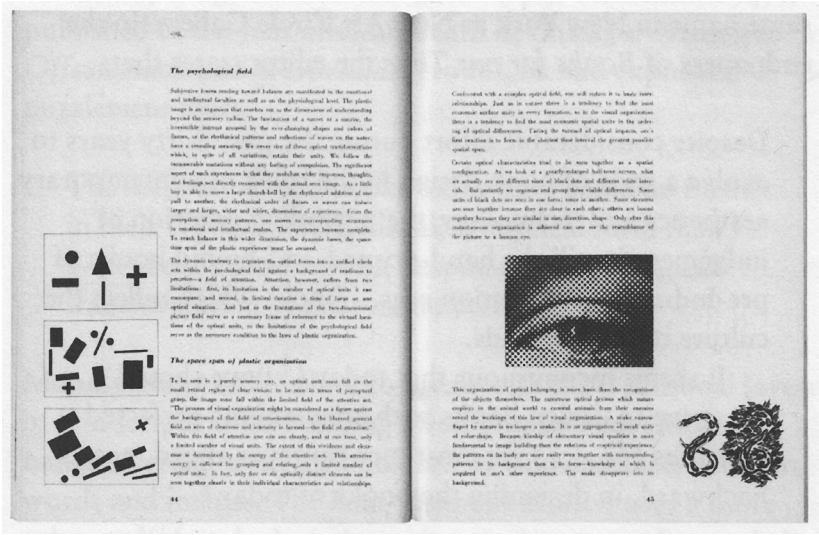
Rethink the book functions in their physical, optical and psychological aspects. A book has weight, size, thickness and tactile qualities, qualities which are handled by the hand, as its optical form is handled by the eye … The book can be conceived of in the same sense as the handle of a tool or a utensil … and with perfect control.[1]

Only after this discussion of the needs of the hand does Kepes go on to talk about the needs of the eye, and of the reader's mind behind the eye.

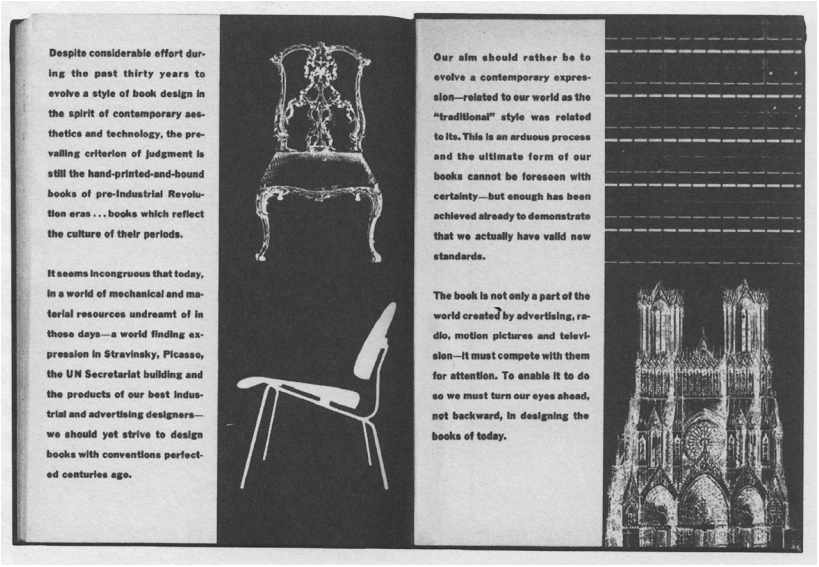
The first illustrations to Kepes' article are of his book *Language of Vision* (Paul Theobald, 1944). This publication is also reproduced in *Books for our Time* (Oxford University Press, 1951), which accompanied the exhibition of the same name in New York at New Art Circle Gallery. In the endpapers of Books for our Time the editor states that:

Despite considerable effort during the past thirty years to evolve a style of book design in the spirit of contemporary aesthetics and technology, the prevailing criterion of judgement is still the hand-printed—and—bound books of pre-Industrial Revolution eras … books which reflect the culture of their periods.

1. Gyorgy Kepes et al., Graphic Forms, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1949, p.8.



Language of Vision (1944)



Books for our Time (1951)

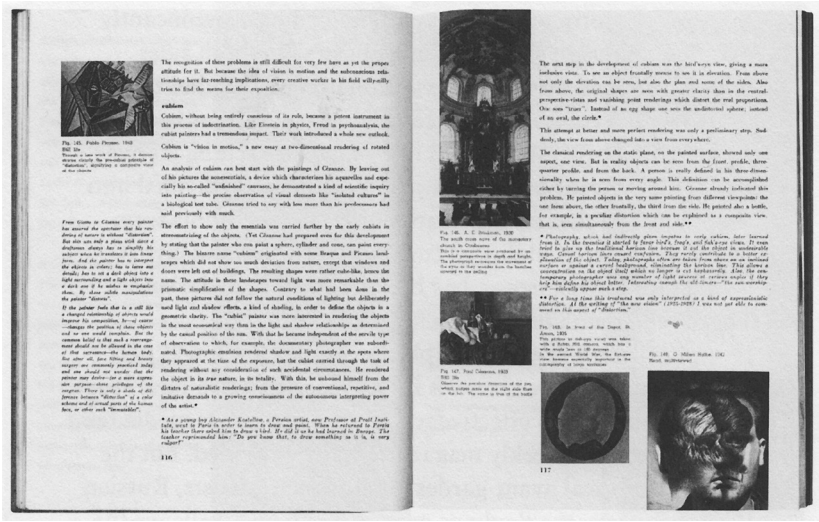
It seems incongruous that today (…) we should yet strive to design books with conventions perfected centuries ago. (…) we must turn our eyes ahead, not backward, in designing the books of today.[2]

> In short, the form of the book has not changed significantly over the centuries: sheets of paper, printed on both sides, folded, trimmed on three edges and fastened together on the fourth with a cover. Once a craft, book making has become an industrial process. Today's mass-market paperbacks even retain the conventions of title page and contents divided into chapters. And the standardisation and success of this form of printed text, its ability to convey a narrative and give it a structure and sequence, has been frustrating to designers. They are left with little scope for invention.
>
> Apart from a few typographic eccentricities, it was not until the modernist upheavals in the years after the First World War that the book's effectiveness in an age of mass media (and of the illustrated weekly magazine) was questioned. But the various historical avant-gardes – Futurists, Dadaists, Russian Constructivists, the Bauhaus masters – did not challenge the physical form of the book. They wanted to extend the ways in which the page could 'speak' to the reader. They were asking for its graphics to be updated, with such slogans as Moholy-Nagy's: 'Typography is the communication of ideas through printed design.'
>
> Another reproduction in *Books for our Time* is a spread of Moholy-Nagy's *Vision in Motion* (Paul Theobald, 1947), published in the year after his death in Chicago. Writing in Offset, Buck und Werbekunst (1926), he had expressed puzzlement that:

The majority of our books today have come no further in their typographical, visual, synoptical form than Gutenberg's productions, despite the technological transformation in their manufacture.[3]

2. Marshall Lee (ed.), Books for our Time, New York, Oxford University Press, 1951, endpapers.

3. László Moholy-Nagy, Offset, Buck und Werbokunst, Leipzig, 1926, no.7, reprinted in H.M. Wingler, The Bauhaus, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1969, p.80.

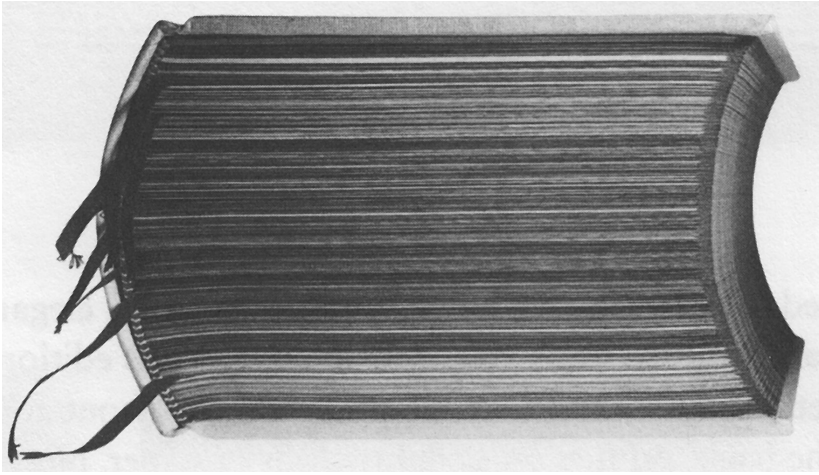


Vision in Motion (1947)

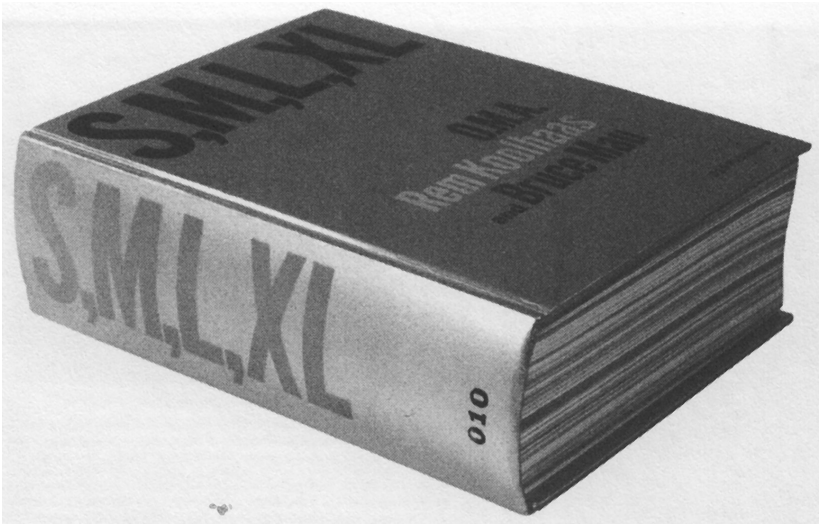
Moholy-Nagy did his best to break with the traditional layout of film scripts in his *Painting Photography Film* (Albert Langen Verlag, 1925), a book full of wild contrasts between words and images. The later Vision in Motion uses a more sober style, but deploys the main text, images and extended captions in the same way as illustrated magazines, allowing the reader to 'operate' in two ways. First, to skim through, looking at the pictures and captions and, second, after this familiarisation with the book's general ideas, to settle into the text.

Sixty years later, book design has become a largely conventional affair, in the hands of publishers (at least in the UK) who often resort to low production standards. At the same time, for better and often worse, it has become a medium for extravagant image-making. Kepes would be astonished by the way contemporary designers deal with a book's 'weight, size, thickness and tactile qualities'. Indeed, these characteristics often overpower the most admired books today. Dutch designer Irma

Boom, well-known for a small book of more than 2,000 pages – almost as thick as it is wide and weighing 3.5 kilos – has had to concede that 'the contents of that particular book are so much more interesting than the look of it'. Such fashionable gigantism is typified by Bruce Mau's *S,M,L,XL* (The Monacelli Press, 1995), a huge portfolio for the author-architect Rem Koolhaas and his ideas.



SHV Think Book 1996–1896 (1996)



S,M,L,XL (1995)

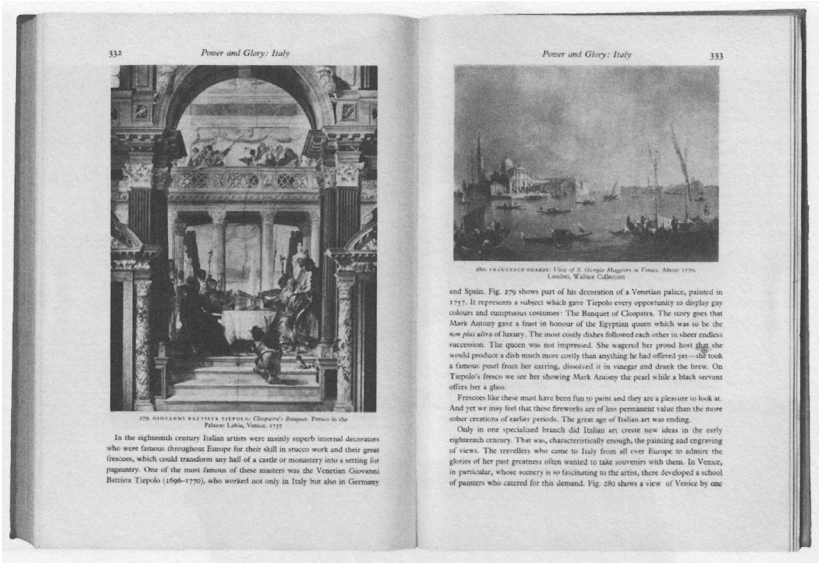
Mau also designed a series of books for the Getty Foundation. One is an 850-page volume of essays by the art historian Aby Warburg, who was the subject of a farewell lecture given by fellow art historian Ernst Gombrich. When the latter arrived at the lectern, on which lay the Mau-designed tome, he slapped his hand down on the book and declared, 'This book is too big'.

With fewer than 500 pages, Gombrich's best-known book, *The Story of Art* (Phaidon, 1950) is comfortable to hold, printed letterpress on coated paper. The illustrations appear where they are needed in the text, making this book one of the first 'integrated' books, since at the time plates were usually located at the back, separated from the text. Phaidon, the original publisher, reissued *The Story of Art* in 2006 as a pocket-sized paperback with more than 1,000 pages, elegantly produced and typeset, and expertly printed. For this edition, Phaidon returned to the old ways, with text at the front and plates at the back, printed on a slightly heavier paper. No longer does the story unfold. To link the words to the images, the reader is asked to juggle backwards and forwards with the help of woven bookmarks. This edition – and there were sixteen before this 'pocket' edition – is the first in which Gombrich was not involved in the layout. As he explained in the preface to the 1971 edition, the original book was:

Planned from the outset to tell the story of art in both words and pictures by enabling readers as far as possible to have the illustration discussed in the text in front of – them, without having to turn the page.[4]

This aim was achieved through 'weeks of intense collaboration', which included, Gombrich wrote, 'making me write another paragraph here or suggesting another illustration there'.

4. Ernst Gombrich, The Story of Art, London, Phaidon, 1971, preface to the 12th edition, reprinted in The Story of Art, London, Phaidon, 2006, pp.11–12.



332 *Power and Glory: Italy*

279. GIOVANNI BATTISTA TIEPOLO: *Cleopatra's Banquet*. Fresco in the Palazzo Labia, Venice. 1757

In the eighteenth century Italian artists were mainly superb internal decorators who were famous throughout Europe for their skill in stucco work and their great frescoes, which could transform any hall of a castle or monastery into a setting for pageantry. One of the most famous of these masters was the Venetian Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770), who worked not only in Italy but also in Germany

Power and Glory: Italy 333

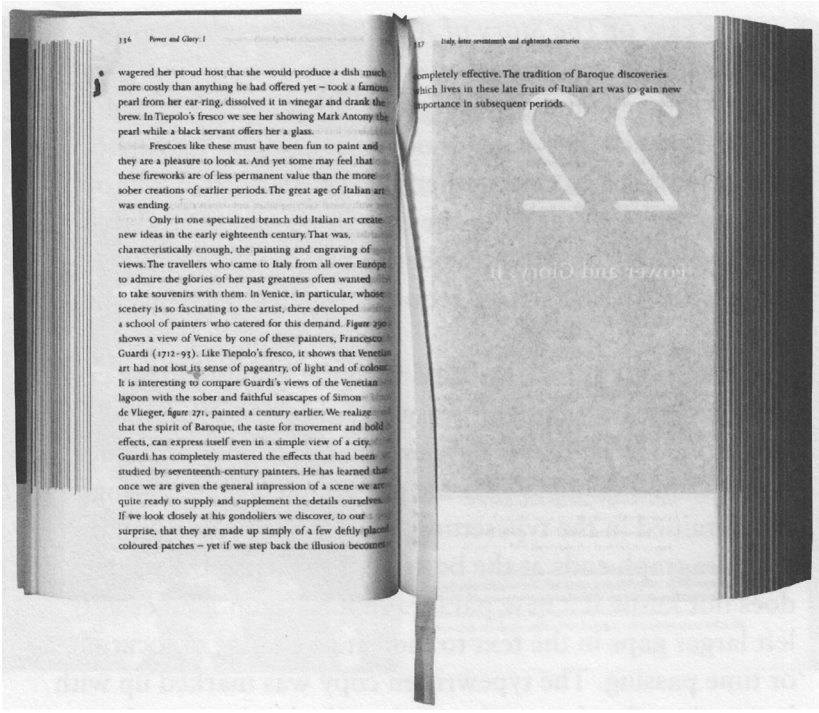
280. FRANCESCO GUARDI: *View of S. Giorgio Maggiore in Venice*. About 1770. London, Wallace Collection

and Spain. Fig. 279 shows part of his decoration of a Venetian palace, painted in 1757. It represents a subject which gave Tiepolo every opportunity to display gay colours and sumptuous costumes: The Banquet of Cleopatra. The story goes that Mark Antony gave a feast in honour of the Egyptian queen which was to be the *non plus ultra* of luxury. The most costly dishes followed each other in sheer endless succession. The queen was not impressed. She wagered her proud host that she would produce a dish much more costly than anything he had offered yet—she took a famous pearl from her earring, dissolved it in vinegar and drank the brew. On Tiepolo's fresco we see her showing Mark Antony the pearl while a black servant offers her a glass.

Frescoes like these must have been fun to paint and they are a pleasure to look at. And yet we may feel that these fireworks are of less permanent value than the more sober creations of earlier periods. The great age of Italian art was ending.

Only in one specialized branch did Italian art create new ideas in the early eighteenth century. That was, characteristically enough, the painting and engraving of views. The travellers who came to Italy from all over Europe to admire the glories of her past greatness often wanted to take souvenirs with them. In Venice, in particular, whose scenery is so fascinating to the artist, there developed a school of painters who catered for this demand. Fig. 280 shows a view of Venice by one of these painters,

The Story of Art (1950)



336 *Power and Glory: I*

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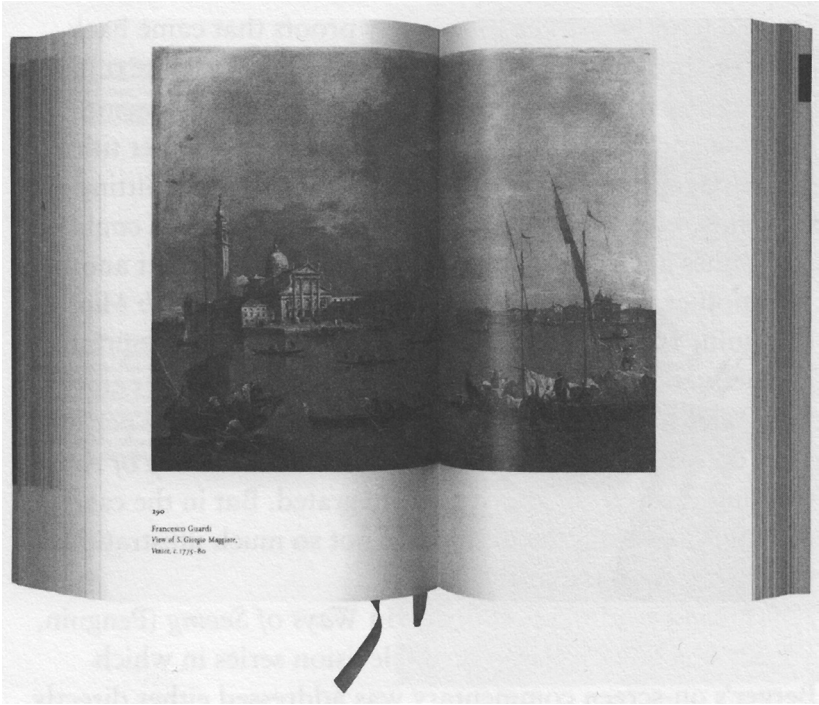
completely effective. The tradition of Baroque discoveries which lives in these late fruits of Italian art was to gain new importance in subsequent periods.

The Story of Art (2006)



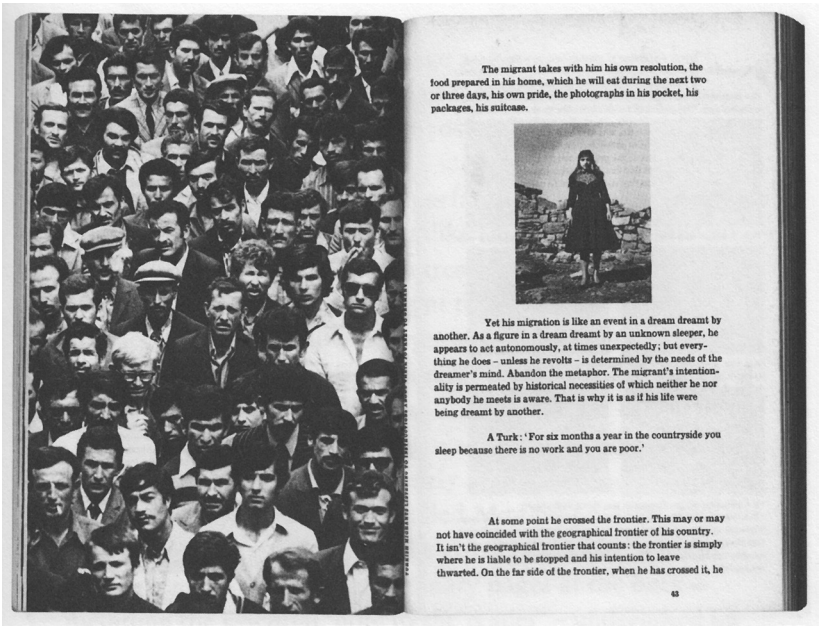
The Story of Art (2006)

The case of *The Story of Art* underscores the book's central role as go-between in conveying the author's meaning to the reader. And the most rewarding way to ensure that the go-between has understood the message is for author and designer to work together. Of course, a plain text only presents the designer with the task of making it readable and fit into the smallest number of pages, while at the same time meeting Kepes' requirements for the hand and the eye.

For several years, I worked with the writer and art critic John Berger, starting with a novel entitled *G* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972). Berger's typewritten text used line spaces rather than indents to indicate paragraphs. This spacing was retained in the typesetting, despite the problem that if a paragraph ends at the bottom of the page, the reader does not know if a new paragraph has begun. Berger also left larger gaps in the text to indicate a change

of location or time passing. The typewritten copy was marked up with instructions for the typesetter, since the book was to be printed letterpress. The long galley proofs that came back from the printer were then cut up and the strips of text pasted up, page by page, with precise measurements for placing the type and chapter numbers (there were no chapter titles). These pages became the next printer's instruction. Sitting next to Berger, I felt no awkwardness in asking him if he could cut some lines at one point or if space could be added at another.

Another book I made with Berger was *A Seventh Man* (Penguin, 1975). Because the type was filmset, photo-printed galleys were pasted up on pre-printed grids, leaving empty rectangles to photographs which we selected as the pages were constructed. As with Gombrich and *The Story of Art*, text and illustration are closely integrated. But in the case of *A Seventh Man*, the images are not so much illustrations – they are as essential as the text.



The migrant takes with him his own resolution, the food prepared in his home, which he will eat during the next two or three days, his own pride, the photographs in his pocket, his packages, his suitcase.

Yet his migration is like an event in a dream dreamt by another. As a figure in a dream dreamt by an unknown sleeper, he appears to act autonomously, at times unexpectedly; but everything he does – unless he revolts – is determined by the needs of the dreamer's mind. Abandon the metaphor. The migrant's intentionality is permeated by historical necessities of which neither he nor anybody he meets is aware. That is why it is as if his life were being dreamt by another.

A Turk: 'For six months a year in the countryside you sleep because there is no work and you are poor.'

At some point he crossed the frontier. This may or may not have coincided with the geographical frontier of his country. It isn't the geographical frontier that counts: the frontier is simply where he is liable to be stopped and his intention to leave thwarted. On the far side of the frontier, when he has crossed it, he

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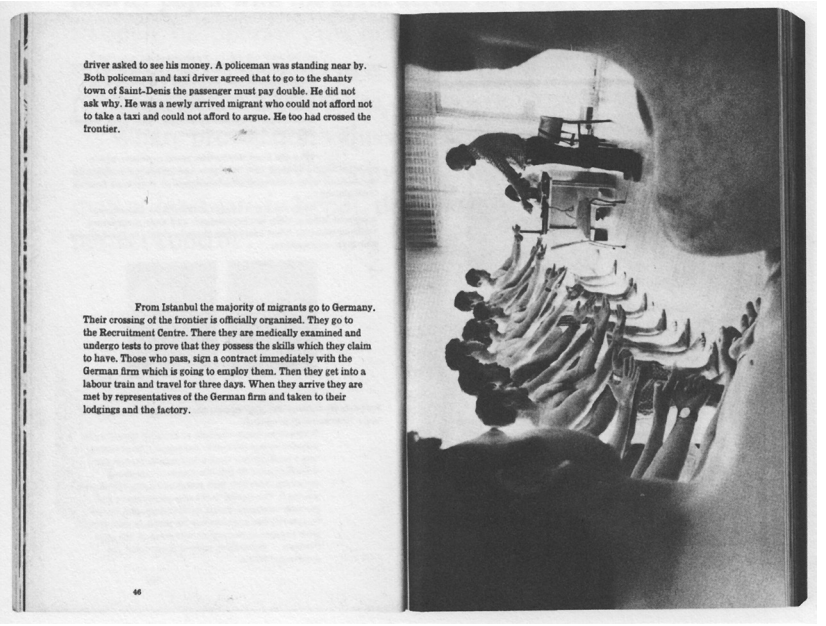
A Seventh Man (1975)


driver asked to see his money. A policeman was standing near by. Both policeman and taxi driver agreed that to go to the shanty town of Saint-Denis the passenger must pay double. He did not ask why. He was a newly arrived migrant who could not afford not to take a taxi and could not afford to argue. He too had crossed the frontier.

From Istanbul the majority of migrants go to Germany. Their crossing of the frontier is officially organized. They go to the Recruitment Centre. There they are medically examined and undergo tests to prove that they possess the skills which they claim to have. Those who pass, sign a contract immediately with the German firm which is going to employ them. Then they get into a labour train and travel for three days. When they arrive they are met by representatives of the German firm and taken to their lodgings and the factory.

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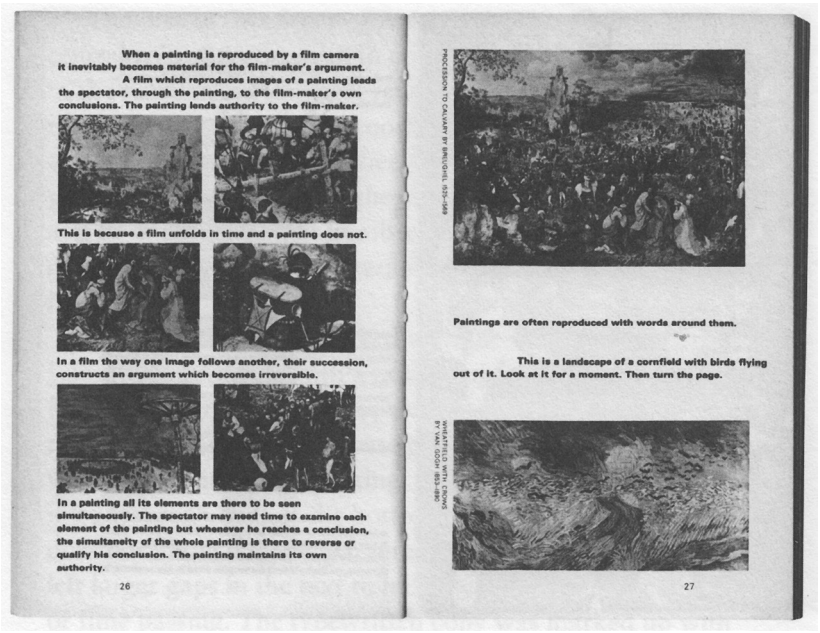
A Seventh Man (1975)

This integration goes further in *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin, 1972). The book is based on a television series in which Berger's on-screen commentary was addressed either directly at the viewer or as a voice-over accompanying the image of a painting. On occasion there was an image without sound – this silence translated on the page as blank space. In fact, this interaction between word and image was hardly new, having been perfected in the 1930s by John Heartfield, among others.

In *Ways of Seeing*, a bold typeface grants the same weight to the text as to the images – unlike traditional popular art histories, which the reader can treat like a coffee-table book, scanning the pictures, glancing at the captions. To avoid distracting from the flow of argument, the captions in *Ways of Seeing* are limited to simple identifications running vertically alongside the images.



When a painting is reproduced by a film camera it inevitably becomes material for the film-maker's argument.

A film which reproduces images of a painting leads the spectator, through the painting, to the film-maker's own conclusions. The painting lends authority to the film-maker.

This is because a film unfolds in time and a painting does not.

In a film the way one image follows another, their succession, constructs an argument which becomes irreversible.

In a painting all its elements are there to be seen simultaneously. The spectator may need time to examine each element of the painting but whenever he reaches a conclusion, the simultaneity of the whole painting is there to reverse or qualify his conclusion. The painting maintains its own authority.

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PROCESSION TO CALVARY BY BRUEGHEL 1525–569

Paintings are often reproduced with words around them.

This is a landscape of a cornfield with birds flying out of it. Look at it for a moment. Then turn the page.

WHEATFIELD WITH CROWS BY VAN GOGH 1853–890

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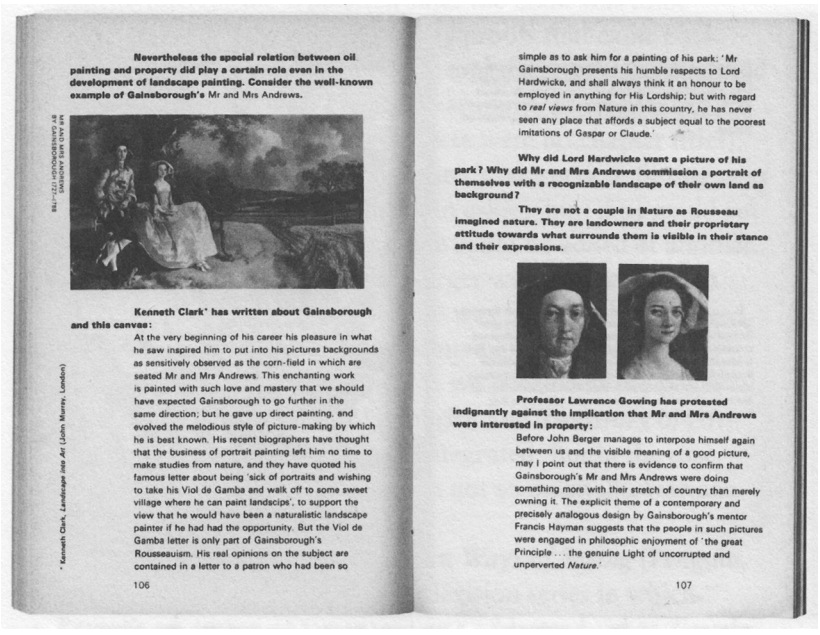

Nevertheless the special relation between oil painting and property did play a certain role even in the development of landscape painting. Consider the well-known example of Gainsborough's Mr and Mrs Andrews.

MR AND MRS ANDREWS BY GAINSBOROUGH 1722–1788

Kenneth Clark* has written about Gainsborough and this canvas:

> At the very beginning of his career his pleasure in what he saw inspired him to put into his pictures backgrounds as sensitively observed as the corn-field in which are seated Mr and Mrs Andrews. This enchanting work is painted with such love and mastery that we should have expected Gainsborough to go further in the same direction; but he gave up direct painting, and evolved the melodious style of picture-making by which he is best known. His recent biographers have thought that the business of portrait painting left him no time to make studies from nature, and they have quoted his famous letter about being 'sick of portraits and wishing to take his Viol de Gamba and walk off to some sweet village where he can paint landscips', to support the view that he would have been a naturalistic landscape painter if he had had the opportunity. But the Viol de Gamba letter is only part of Gainsborough's Rousseauism. His real opinions on the subject are contained in a letter to a patron who had been so

* Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (John Murray, London)

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simple as to ask him for a painting of his park: 'Mr Gainsborough presents his humble respects to Lord Hardwicke, and shall always think it an honour to be employed in anything for His Lordship; but with regard to *real views* from Nature in this country, he has never seen any place that affords a subject equal to the poorest imitations of Gaspar or Claude.'

Why did Lord Hardwicke want a picture of his park? Why did Mr and Mrs Andrews commission a portrait of themselves with a recognizable landscape of their own land as background?

They are not a couple in Nature as Rousseau imagined nature. They are landowners and their proprietary attitude towards what surrounds them is visible in their stance and their expressions.

Professor Lawrence Gowing has protested indignantly against the implication that Mr and Mrs Andrews were interested in property:

> Before John Berger manages to interpose himself again between us and the visible meaning of a good picture, may I point out that there is evidence to confirm that Gainsborough's Mr and Mrs Andrews were doing something more with their stretch of country than merely owning it. The explicit theme of a contemporary and precisely analogous design by Gainsborough's mentor Francis Hayman suggests that the people in such pictures were engaged in philosophic enjoyment of 'the great Principle . . . the genuine Light of uncorrupted and unperverted *Nature*.'

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Ways of Seeing (1972)

The original *Ways of Seeing* was a more or less standard paperback production of the early 1970s. It is now re-issued by Penguin Books in a series called *Modern Classics*. In a smaller format, repaginated, the cover reworked, without a title page but with the preliminary pages at the back – including the essential 'note to the reader' – underinked on heavier paper with the grain across the page, far from easy to open, or 'operate', the book at least reflects the culture of its time: an abuse of new technology under market-driven pressure. In the worst sense, a Modern Classic.

Where production values are so low, the arrival of new technology, such as the Sony Reader and Amazon Kindle, may at least satisfy Kepes' demands for 'a utensil' 'with perfect control'.

Text and Images by Richard Hollis. Edited and Designed by Yaroslav Antipin. 'Ways of seeing books' was first published in The form of the book book (Occasional Papers, 2009).

Typeset in Happy Times at the IKOB New Game Plus Edition, Granjon LT Std, Bauer Bodoni Std 1.

Printed on DNS Color Print 120 gr.

Special Thanks to Roman Chernyakov for a nice health, and to Sebastian Campos for guidance

Edition: 3

Printed in Moscow