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Quotes by Berger, John

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John Peter Berger (b. November 5, 1926) is an art critic, novelist, painter, and author. The best-known among his many works include the novel *G.*, winner of the 1972 Booker Prize, and the introductory essay on art criticism *Ways of Seeing*, written as an accompaniment to a significant BBC series of the same name, and often used as a college text.

One of the fundamental reasons why so many doctors become cynical and disillusioned is precisely because, when the abstract idealism has worn thin, they are uncertain about the value of the actual lives of the patients they are treating. This is not because they are callous or personally inhuman: it is because they live in and accept a society which is incapable of knowing what a human life is worth.

- Berger, John

Compare the cinema with theatre. Both are dramatic arts. Theatre brings actors before a public and every night during the season they re-enact the same drama. Deep in the nature of theatre is a sense of ritual. The cinema, by contrast, transports its audience individually, singly, out of the theatre towards the unknown.

- Berger, John

The envied are like bureaucrats; the more impersonal they are, the greater the illusion (for themselves and for others) of their power.

- Berger, John

Nothing in the nature around us is evil. This needs to be repeated since one of the human ways of talking oneself into inhuman acts is to cite the supposed cruelty of nature.

- Berger, John

Glamour cannot exist without personal social envy being a common and widespread emotion.

- Berger, John

When we suffer anguish we return to early childhood because that is the period in which we first learnt to suffer the experience of total loss. It was more than that. It was the period in which we suffered more total losses than in all the rest of our life put together.

- Berger, John

The human imagination... has great difficulty in living strictly within the confines of a materialist practice or philosophy. It dreams, like a dog in its basket, of hares in the open.

- Berger, John

One can say of language that it is potentially the only human home, the only dwelling place that cannot be hostile to man.

- Berger, John

A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork. What is significant, and is so difficult for the urban stranger to understand, is that the two statements are connected by an and not by a but.

- Berger, John

I can't tell you what art does and how it does it, but I know that often art has judged the judges, pleaded revenge to the innocent and shown to the future what the past suffered, so that it has never been forgotten. Art, when it functions like this, becomes a meeting-place of the invisible, the irreducible, the enduring, guts, and honor.

- Berger, John

The media network has its idols, but its principal idol is its own style which generates an aura of winning and leaves the rest in darkness. It recognizes neither pity nor pitilessness.

- Berger, John

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.

- Berger, John

All nationalisms are at heart deeply concerned with names: with the most immaterial and original human invention. Those who dismiss names as a detail have never been displaced; but the peoples on the peripheries are always being displaced. That is why they insist upon their continuity -- their links with their dead and the unborn.

- Berger, John

Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display. The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress.

- Berger, John

Ours is the century of enforced travel of disappearances. The century of people helplessly seeing others, who were close to them, disappear over the horizon.

- Berger, John

The past grows gradually around one, like a placenta for dying.

- Berger, John

Unlike any other visual image, a photograph is not a rendering, an imitation or an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it. No painting or drawing, however naturalist, belongs to its subject in the way that a photograph does.

- Berger, John

The camera relieves us of the burden of memory. It surveys us like God, and it surveys for us. Yet no other god has been so cynical, for the camera records in order to forget.

- Berger, John

All photographs are there to remind us of what we forget. In this -- as in other ways -- they are the opposite of paintings. Paintings record what the painter remembers. Because

each one of us forgets different things, a photo more than a painting may change its meaning according to who is looking at it.

- Berger, John

Autobiography begins with a sense of being alone. It is an orphan form.

- Berger, John

The poverty of our century is unlike that of any other. It is not, as poverty was before, the result of natural scarcity, but of a set of priorities imposed upon the rest of the world by the rich. Consequently, the modern poor are not pitied but written off as trash. The twentieth-century consumer economy has produced the first culture for which a beggar is a reminder of nothing.

- Berger, John

Publicity is the life of this culture. Without publicity capitalism could not survive and at the same time publicity is its dream.

- Berger, John

When we read a story, we inhabit it. The covers of the book are like a roof and four walls. What is to happen next will take place within the four walls of the story. And this is possible because the story's voice makes everything its own.

- Berger, John

Is boredom anything less than the sense of one's faculties slowly dying?

- Berger, John

Sometimes, because of its immediacy, television produces a kind of electronic parable. Berlin, for instance, on the day the Wall was opened. Rostropovich was playing his cello by the Wall that no longer cast a shadow, and a million East Berliners were thronging to the West to shop with an allowance given them by West German banks! At that moment the whole world saw how materialism had lost its awesome historic power and become a shopping list.

- Berger, John

Modern thought has transferred the spectral character of Death to the notion of time itself. Time has become Death triumphant over all.

- Berger, John

Today the discredit of words is very great. Most of the time the media transmit lies. In the face of an intolerable world, words appear to change very little. State power has become congenitally deaf, which is why --but the editorialists forget it --terrorists are reduced to bombs and hijacking.

- Berger, John

What is saved in the cinema when it achieves art is a spontaneous continuity with all mankind. It is not an art of the princes or the bourgeoisie. It is popular and vagrant. In the sky of the cinema people learn what they might have been and discover what belongs to them apart from their single lives.

- Berger, John

Every city has a sex and an age which have nothing to do with demography. Rome is feminine. So is Odessa. London is a teenager, an urchin, and, in this, hasn't changed since the time of Dickens. Paris, I believe, is a man in his twenties in love with an older woman.

- Berger, John

Common-sense is part of the home-made ideology of those who have been deprived of fundamental learning, of those who have been kept ignorant. This ideology is compounded from different sources: items that have survived from religion, items of empirical knowledge, items of protective skepticism, items culled for comfort from the superficial learning that is supplied. But the point is that common-sense can never teach itself, can never advance beyond its own limits, for as soon as the lack of fundamental learning has been made good, all items become questionable and the whole function of common-sense is destroyed. Common-sense can only exist as a category insofar as it can be distinguished from the spirit of inquiry, from philosophy.

- Berger, John

Compassion has no place in the natural order of the world which operates on the basis of necessity. Compassion opposes this order and is therefore best thought of as being in some way supernatural.

- Berger, John

Post-modernism has cut off the present from all futures. The daily media add to this by cutting off the past. Which means that critical opinion is often orphaned in the present.

- Berger, John

A man's death makes everything certain about him. Of course, secrets may die with him. And of course, a hundred years later somebody looking through some papers may discover a fact which throws a totally different light on his life and of which all the people who attended his funeral were ignorant. Death changes the facts qualitatively but not quantitatively. One does not know more facts about a man because he is dead. But what one already knows hardens and becomes definite. We cannot hope for ambiguities to be clarified, we cannot hope for further change, we cannot hope for more. We are now the protagonists and we have to make up our minds.

- Berger, John



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