

Berger's portrayal of men vs women

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



John Berger's Portrayal of Male versus Female Nudity and its relation to Modern Society In the book *Ways of Seeing*, chapter 3 by John Berger, Berger outlines his portrayal of the differences between men and women and the manner in which they are culturally represented by analyzing nude depictions of woman in the European artistic tradition through paintings. The paintings overtime have demonstrated that men have more power over women as they are the main spectators of the paintings, and the women are the object of the paintings.

These standards described in his article are still significant in today's society, as seen by the reaction of the public to the advertisement displays of male nudity for the Leopold Museum in Vienna. According to Berger, the male's presence is all about potency, power, strength and his abilities. He is viewed as the dominant being over the woman whereas the women's presence is about only her and what can or cannot be done to her. Women are more concerned with surveying themselves the way they think others will see them so that they can act in a way that is appealing toward the men.

This suggests that the way she views herself is the way society will see her. This theory is displayed in the styles of the European paintings. The paintings are geared toward the male viewer which gives him a legitimate excuse for looking at the nude women in order to flatter himself. The paintings clearly demonstrate through the expression of the woman that the woman is aware that she is being viewed thus objectifying herself as a subject of a gaze. Berger simplifies this by saying " Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. " (Berger, 47).

The overall point the chapter makes is that men have more power over women, and because of this, women are property of the men. Berger's chapter gives many examples that support his portrayal that men are the more dominant gender. For example, when reflecting on the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, it is Eve who gets punished, and Adam that becomes the agent of God. In another painting, The Judgement of Paris, Paris awards an apple to the woman he believes to be the most beautiful thus turning beauty into a competition. The woman who is the most beautiful is to be owned by the judge, thus objectifying the woman to the man.

Berger also mentions that some paintings also include a male lover however the attention on the women is rarely toward him, but is geared toward the viewer of the painting thus allowing the spectator the belief that he is the owner of the woman. Although Berger mainly talks about the cultural perspective of men and women, it is clear that his belief that men have more power over women are still occurring in recent society as seen in an article from The New York Times, and an article from BBC news on the public reactions to the nude male advertisements for the Leopold Museum in Vienna.

Society today even creates this image that men have more power over women, and when the roles are reversed, as displayed in the male nude advertisements, it causes public outrage. In the BBC article, according to Tobias Natter, the director of the Leopold Museum, when it comes to male nudity, " Somehow it is taboo. " (Bell). It is true that male nudity is getting a new presence in modern society and is becoming increasingly more normal,

however one can still assume a few reasons as to why there was an opposition to the display of the naked men on the posters.

Going along with Berger's view of women being the objects of the photos, the first reason is that having the men become the objects of the photos is extremely unusual and not something society is accustomed to. This is because the male is generally the power figure, and to see a man so vulnerable is such an unnatural thing. Another reason why these photos are deemed inappropriate is that because the male is now the object, the role of the spectator is now more difficult to define. Men do not want to be put in a position where they survey themselves. According to Berger, that role belongs to the women.

Men also do not want to be seen as having less power and more vulnerability. Female nudity is associated with beauty and erotics. It is meant to be unthreatening. Male nudity however is much more challenging. Society in general is uncomfortable with seeing male genitalia in the public. Erich Kocina from the BBC news article states " We are not used to seeing a penis - I think that is the main problem for people. " (Bell). This opposition was reportedly greater among women because some women felt as though the images were pornographic and inappropriate for children to see.

In the New York Times article, Klaus Pokorny, the museums spokesman, stated that women had to shield their children's eyes from the pictures of the naked men. (Cottrell). Also, because women are slightly more modest than men, they might be more prone to embarrassment. Even though society has advanced in so many ways, it is still a little slow in adjusting to the views of men and women. Many people these days say that men and
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women are equal. More women are working "manly" jobs, and more men are becoming stay at home fathers. However, male versus female nudity still appears to be an issue.

This should not be the way society thinks but unfortunately, nudity is still not totally accepted. The advertisements of the nude men should be a good way to open the eyes of the public to see the direction in which society is advancing and have awareness that men and women should not be portrayed so differently. Works Cited Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin, 1972. 45-64. Print. Bell, Bethany. "The shock of the (male) nude." *BBC News Magazine [Vienna]* 18 Nov 2012, Web. 19 Jan. 2013 Cottrell, Chris. "Viennese Museum to Cover Nude Ads." *The New York Times* 17 Oct 2012, U. S Edition, Web. 17 Jan. 2013.