John Berger: Reproduction and Context

Art Appreciation · Semester 1

Overview:

Read November 19 for November 20. Ways of Seeing, chapter 1 (1972).

Before reading:

Berger argues that reproduction changes where and how an image is encountered. The same image can enter different arguments. He also preserves a difference between an original material object and its reproduction. Read his claim as an argument to test, rather than a rule that every copy means anything at all.

Mark one phrase for discussion. No separate reading report is required.

Source quotations:

Supplied chapter PDF, actual pages 7–8, 13 and 14–15. Nonconsecutive passages are separated by omission markers.

Source text: 423 words. Introductions, vocabulary and questions are course commentary. Paragraphs below retain the author’s wording; line wrapping is removed.

The uniqueness of every painting was once part of the uniqueness of the place where it resided. Sometimes the painting was transportable. But it could never be seen in two places at the same time. When the camera reproduces a painting, it destroys the uniqueness of its image. As a result its meaning changes. Or, more exactly, its meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings. This is vividly illustrated by what happens when a painting is shown on a television screen. The painting enters each viewer's house. There it is surrounded by his wallpaper, his furniture, his mementoes. It enters the atmosphere of his family. It becomes their talking point. It lends its meaning to their meaning. At the same time it enters a million other houses and, in each of them, is seen in a different context. Because of the camera, the painting now travels to the spectator rather than the spectator to the painting. In its travels, its meaning is diversified.

One might argue that all reproductions more or less distort, and that therefore the original painting is still in a sense unique.

[Passage omitted.]

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.

[Image/caption comparison reconstructed below.]

It is hard to define exactly how the words have changed the image but undoubtedly they have. The image now illustrates the sentence. In this essay each image reproduced has become part of an argument which has little or nothing to do with the painting's original independent meaning. The words have quoted the paintings to confirm their own verbal authority. (The essays without words in this book may make that distinction clearer.)

[Passage omitted.]

Consequently a reproduction, as well as making its own references to the image of its original, becomes itself the reference point for other images. The meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it. Such authority as it retains, is distributed over the whole context in which it appears.

[Passage omitted.]

Original paintings are silent and still in a sense that information never is. Even a reproduction hung on a wall is not comparable in this respect for in the original the silence and stillness permeate the actual material, the paint, in which one follows the traces of the painter's immediate gestures. This has the effect of closing the distance in time between the painting of the picture and one's own act of looking at it.

Image and caption comparison:

Look at the image before reading the caption on the following line. In print, cover the caption at first.



Vincent van Gogh, Wheatfield with Crows, 1890. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Existing course reproduction, public domain.

Source quotation

Caption used in Berger's demonstration:

"This is the last picture that Van Gogh painted before he killed himself."

Compare the framing

This reconstructs the comparison because the supplied webpage PDF has a missing image. The caption is a historical claim to verify, not a fact established by the painting or a reason to assume its mood. Explain how it directs your reading. The painting's sequence within Van Gogh's last works should be checked through an artwork record before using that claim as evidence.

Vocabulary:

- **Reproduction:** Another version made through a process such as printing or photography.
- **Context:** Surrounding words, objects and circumstances that affect interpretation.
- **Authority:** The power to make a reading seem credible.
- **Mystification:** An explanation that hides how value or power operates.

Discuss:

- Choose one visible relationship in the painting before reading the caption. What changes in your account after the caption?
- Does the caption direct attention to a detail, or supply information that the image cannot establish?
- What could remain important about encountering the original even if the reproduction is useful?

Connection:

Steyerl follows the routes by which copies reach these settings. Ask who gains access and who controls the route.

Full source / further reading.

Printable handout:

Download the supported reading PDF.

Hito Steyerl: Circulation, Access and Value

Art Appreciation · Semester 1

Overview:

Read December 3–4; discuss December 8. “In Defense of the Poor Image,” e-flux journal 10 (November 2009).

Before reading:

Steyerl writes about images moving through unequal systems of distribution. Her poor image is more than a pixelated appearance. The omitted middle sections discuss film archives, privatization and the promise of an imperfect cinema. The selection keeps opportunities for participation beside the commercial conditions that shape them. Juan García Espinosa’s imperfect cinema broadens participation rather than making technical polish its sole standard.

Mark one phrase for discussion. No separate reading report is required.

Source quotations:

Supplied PDF, page 1; section 4, page 6; section 5, pages 7–8; section 6, page 8. Omitted sections are marked. Footnote indicators are omitted; consult the full course copy for notes.

Source text: 547 words. Introductions, vocabulary and questions are course commentary. Paragraphs below retain the author’s wording; line wrapping is removed.

The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution. The poor image is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution. The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited. It transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction. The image is liberated from the vaults of cinemas and archives and thrust into digital uncertainty, at the expense of its own substance. The poor image tends towards abstraction: it is a visual idea in its very becoming.

[Passage omitted.]

In some way, the economy of poor images corresponds to the description of imperfect cinema, while the description of perfect cinema represents rather the concept of cinema as a flagship store. But the real and contemporary imperfect cinema is also much more ambivalent and affective than Espinosa had anticipated. On the one hand, the economy of poor images, with its immediate possibility of worldwide distribution and its ethics of remix and appropriation, enables the participation of a much larger group of producers than ever before. But this does not mean that these opportunities are only used for progressive ends. Hate speech, spam, and other rubbish make their way through digital connections as well. Digital communication has also become one of the most contested markets – a zone that has long been subjected to an ongoing original accumulation and to massive (and, to a certain extent, successful) attempts at privatization.

[Passage omitted.]

But, simultaneously, a paradoxical reversal happens. The circulation of poor images creates a circuit, which fulfills the original ambitions of militant and (some) essayistic and experimental cinema – to create an alternative economy of images, an imperfect cinema existing inside as well as beyond and under commercial media streams. In the age of file-sharing, even marginalized content circulates again and reconnects dispersed worldwide audiences.

The poor image thus constructs anonymous global networks just as it creates a shared history. It builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates. By losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it. This aura is no longer based on the permanence of the "original," but on the transience of the copy. It is no longer anchored within a classical public sphere mediated and supported by the frame of the nation state or corporation, but floats on the surface of temporary and dubious data pools. By drifting away from the vaults of cinema, it is propelled onto new and ephemeral screens stitched together by the desires of dispersed spectators.

[Passage omitted.]

The poor image is no longer about the real thing – the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is about reality.

Vocabulary:

- **Resolution:** The amount of visual detail represented.
- **Circulation:** The routes through which images move between people and systems.
- **Hierarchy:** An arrangement of unequal status or power.
- **Commodification:** Organizing something as a product or source of exchange value.
- **Exploitation:** Benefiting from another person's work or participation under unequal conditions.
- **Aura:** Here, a term Steyerl reworks around the copy's movement and temporary connections. Compare this with Benjamin's account of an original's presence and history.
- **Lumpen proletarian:** Steyerl uses this class term figuratively for an image with low status in a hierarchy.
- **Originary original:** The supposed first source from which copies descend.

Discuss:

- Where does the same route permit participation and commercial control? Explain a mechanism, rather than treating the two as separate good and bad effects.
- Use an image you can actually inspect. What can you establish about its circulation, and what remains unknown?
- How does your experience of Godard differ from a clip circulating on a phone? Distinguish a designed visual effect from evidence of a file's transmission history.

Connection:

Kissick asks whether deliberate limits on visibility can make a different kind of exchange possible.

Full source / further reading.

Printable handout:

Download the supported reading PDF.

Dean Kissick: Visibility and Cultural Community

Art Appreciation · Semester 1

Overview:

Read December 5–7; return December 8 and 14. “Hello Darkness,” New Models (April 2021).

Before reading:

Kissick begins with an unwanted recommendation and concerns about opaque moderation. He then considers smaller online communities and local print or radio scenes. His examples and platform claims belong to 2021. This selection presents his position on visibility and exchange; it does not establish a universal history of the internet.

Mark one phrase for discussion. No separate reading report is required.

Source quotations:

Supplied eleven-page PDF, actual pages 6–8 and 10–11. Webpage footers numbered /15 are not PDF page numbers. Two nonconsecutive selections; intervening career and identity passages are omitted.

Source text: 590 words. Introductions, vocabulary and questions are course commentary. Paragraphs below retain the author’s wording; line wrapping is removed.

Since the turn of the century there have been warnings that the free internet would be gated by corporations. The Noughties brought the enclosure of the commons by tech giants, while the 2010s brought much more policing of the public by those giants. But at the same time, we have also voluntarily begun to gate the net ourselves. 2017 and 2018 brought the wholesale abandonment of Facebook by Millennials, in favor of more private and impermanent forms of communication like the small group chat and the finsta (pseudonymous “fake Instagram” account); but conversely, this was also when TikTok exploded in popularity among a younger generation. 2019, so far as I can recall, was a great year for subreddits. The big media trend of 2020, a time of pure hysteria, was the rise of paid, or invitation-only, Discord servers and other big group chats on WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, and Slack; and side-chats where you complained about people in the group chat; and subscription-only Substack mailouts, Patreon podcasts and OnlyFans pages; and Close Friends Instagram Stories, which came into their own during lockdowns when many wished to keep their lives and indiscretions

more private. It was a year of fragmented content, and of slipping away into the internet's Dark Forest. Over the past year in Manhattan, attention has also been lavished on short-run, scene-specific print newspapers like Civilization and the Drunken Canal, and magazines like Dirty, which go a step further and don't publish anything online, as well as to platforms like Montez Press Radio, which broadcasts live but is otherwise hard to listen to. Hans Ulrich Obrist used to always say that it's important for an artist to create a "rumour". He'd circumnavigate the globe, chasing after rumours. Likewise, in an age of too much of everything, it makes a twisted kind of sense to publish a paper that few can ever read, or craft ambitious, obtuse radio shows that fade away into the waves. You can will your own scene into being by hyperstition; and once you have, can communicate with it directly through, like Drunken Canal, Close Friends Stories that lead to events, or, like Civilization, complicated metaphysical maps of everyone you've ever met Downtown. In cases like these, ideas from the gated internet are brought back into the real world to amuse, or annoy, everyone else. Sometimes readers are so frustrated that they print their own response paper; which raises the enticing prospect of a return to an 18th-century model, with the presses ever-whirring and everyone constantly publishing their own pamphlets slandering one another.

[Passage omitted.]

Our identities are formed in the relationships we have with others. Those relationships used to take place in public, and now they play out in private. The public sphere, Immanuel Kant thought, was made possible by printed journals, and the cafés and salons in which they were discussed. Such were the conditions in which the Enlightenment could begin. Now we have a far larger and more connected public sphere, and the Enlightenment project is being dismantled. We also have more and more communities thriving, out of sight, in the Dark Forest. These have a waning connection to each other, and the broader public sphere, but it doesn't matter. It's how things always used to be. It's been a nightmare hearing everyone's thoughts and opinions really. We don't have to live in public. We can shadowban ourselves. All we need to find are interesting people we can trust, and places we can speak without interference, free from the sick guiding hands of the attention economy.

Vocabulary:

- **Gating:** Limiting access to a space or its material.
- **Scene:** People connected through shared cultural activity.
- **Attention economy:** Systems that turn people's attention into commercial or social value.
- **Public sphere:** Spaces where people address shared matters beyond private relationships.
- **Hyperstition:** A story or belief that helps bring about the activity it describes. This is a working explanation for Kissick's passage about making a scene.

Discuss:

- Compare Kissick's limited audience with Steyerl's dispersed audience. What kind of exchange does each make possible?
- Who could be excluded by a small group, and what evidence would show that it supports more thoughtful exchange?
- Choose one of Kissick's examples. Separate his observation from the broader claim he draws from it.

Connection:

A community can share an interpretation without establishing whether an image is evidence of an event. Sontag helps distinguish those questions.

Full source / further reading.

Compare this qualified limit on visibility with Steyerl's account of access and value.

Printable handout:

Download the supported reading PDF.

Susan Sontag: Photographs, Evidence and Selection

Art Appreciation · Semester 1

Overview:

Read December 9–10; return December 15 and 18. “In Plato’s Cave,” On Photography (1977).

Before reading:

Sontag asks how photographs become objects, records and forms of possession. The opening comparison with Plato’s cave concerns the difference between images and understanding. The selected paragraphs hold two claims together: a photograph can record something and still interpret it through selection. Her historical examples are part of her argument, not instructions to accept every generalization.

Mark one phrase for discussion. No separate reading report is required.

Source quotations:

Supplied nineteen-page chapter PDF, pages 2–4. The opening appropriation sentences and later evidence/selection paragraphs are nonconsecutive; the gap is marked.

Source text: 455 words. Introductions, vocabulary and questions are course commentary. Paragraphs below retain the author’s wording; line wrapping is removed.

To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.

[Passage omitted.]

Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it. In one version of its utility, the camera record incriminates. Starting with their use by the Paris police in the murderous roundup of Communards in June 1871, photographs became a useful tool of modern states in the surveillance and control of their increasingly mobile populations. In another version of its utility, the camera record justifies. A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture. Whatever the limitations (through amateurism) or pretensions (through artistry) of the individual photographer, a photograph—any photograph

—seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects. Virtuosi of the noble image like Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Strand, composing mighty, unforgettable photographs decade after decade, still want, first of all, to show something "out there," just like the Polaroid owner for whom photographs are a handy, fast form of note-taking, or the shutter-bug with a Brownie who takes snapshots as souvenirs of daily life.

While a painting or a prose description can never be other than a narrowly selective interpretation, a photograph can be treated as a narrowly selective transparency. But despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth. Even when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience. The immensely gifted members of the Farm Security Administration photographic project of the late 1930s (among them Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, Russell Lee) would take dozens of frontal pictures of one of their sharecropper subjects until satisfied that they had gotten just the right look on film—the precise expression on the subject's face that supported their own notions about poverty, light, dignity, texture, exploitation, and geometry. In deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects. Although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are. Those occasions when the taking of photographs is relatively undiscriminating, promiscuous, or self-effacing do not lessen the didacticism of the whole enterprise. This very passivity—and ubiquity—of the photographic record is photography's "message," its aggression.

Vocabulary:

- **Appropriation:** Taking something into possession or use, including making it available as an image.
- **Presumption:** Something initially taken to be true.
- **Veracity:** Truthfulness.
- **Interpretation:** A selection or explanation that gives what is seen a particular meaning.

- **Indexical trace:** A physical or causal connection to what was recorded. This additional working term does not guarantee that a caption is true.

Discuss:

- What claim could the image support? What larger claim would require another source?
- Why does Sontag's account of selection leave room for a photograph to be evidence?
- Compare a personal photograph with a public image. When might keeping a photograph express care, and when could photographing someone exert control?

Connection:

Jacobs tests a definition of photography centered on recording light against one centered on selecting a view.

Use reproduction to distinguish what an image makes available from what a specific factual claim requires.

Printable handout:

Download the supported reading PDF.

Gideon Jacobs: Virtual Photography and Evidence

Art Appreciation · Semester 1

Overview:

Read December 11–13; use December 15 and 18.
“Point of View,” Artforum (February 8, 2021).

Before reading:

Read the companion below after Sontag. It supplies the argument and a way to question it without requiring a private reading account. The publisher’s full essay is optional further reading and may require a subscription.

Mark one phrase for discussion. No separate reading report is required.

Reading companion:

Companion to the Getty/Gran Turismo example, Kent Sheely discussion and concluding definition problem. The only quotation below is Szarkowski’s sentence as quoted by Jacobs. All other explanatory paragraphs are authored course commentary, not an abridged text by Jacobs.

Authored course commentary, prepared with Codex.
The single quoted sentence is attributed above.

Jacobs’s 2021 essay asks what counts as photography when the scene has been made by software. He begins with a concrete institutional example: Getty Images appointing photographers to make images inside Gran Turismo. In his account, the resulting images enter a professional licensing system. His point concerns a change in what the industry recognizes as a photograph. The example does not settle whether a simulated race supplies the same kind of evidence as a race recorded by a camera.

The essay then moves from a business decision to artists who select images inside games. One of his examples is Kent Sheely’s practice of acting as a journalist within Day of Defeat: Source. An imagined environment supplies a place in which someone chooses a position and a moment. Selection can be consequential even when no physical battle stood before a lens. Yet calling that activity journalism raises another question: what event is being documented, and what claim could a viewer reasonably make from the image?

Jacobs sets two definitions against one another. A technical definition connects photography with recording light. A screenshot records a displayed or

rendered image through software. A second definition emphasizes choosing a view. In that account, the act of selecting and framing could connect camera photography with work made inside a virtual environment. These definitions value different features of the practice. Choosing one changes what belongs in the category.

Read this short passage from the closing discussion:

Source quotation

“One might compare the art of photography to the act of pointing.”

Reading the distinction

Jacobs attributes this sentence to John Szarkowski. In this handout it is quoted from Jacobs’s essay, not from a separately inspected Szarkowski edition.

Use Sontag to test what this definition achieves. Selecting a view explains how both a camera photograph and a game image can be interpretations. It does not establish that both record a physical event. A clearly identified screenshot might support a claim about the appearance of a game environment or the choices of its player. It would need different evidence to support a claim that the depicted physical battle actually occurred. Category and evidential use are related questions, but answering one does not answer the other.

An objection is that concentrating on physical events makes virtual activity seem inconsequential. A game tournament, a conversation or an artistic decision can matter to people even if its setting is simulated. This objection gives a reason to distinguish the reality of the activity from the status of the depicted scene. It does not require treating the two as interchangeable. Test Jacobs’s argument by naming the precise activity and the precise claim at issue.

His closing predictions about the importance of virtual imagery belong to 2021. Treat them as predictions to assess, not as verified descriptions of 2026. For the essay, a useful move is to compare a camera image and a clearly labeled screenshot, then state what each lets a viewer know and what each leaves unresolved. You can agree with his broader category of photography while qualifying what an image proves. You can also defend a

narrower category while recognizing the visual decisions involved in making a screenshot.

Vocabulary:

- **Screenshot:** An image captured from what a screen displays or software renders.
- **Referent:** The person, thing or event an image refers to.
- **Simulation:** A constructed model or environment.
- **Curatorial:** Involving selection and arrangement.
- **Ontology:** A question about what kind of thing something is. You can ask the question in plain language.

Discuss:

- What does Getty's decision establish in Jacobs's argument, and what does it leave undecided?
- Can "pointing" define a visual practice without guaranteeing that its scene happened physically?
- Put one claim from Sontag and one from this companion into conversation. Identify what would make them disagree or answer different questions.

Connection:

Use the December 15 photographic-evidence study and December 18 discussion to refine the distinction between a compelling image, a photographic practice and support for a specific factual claim.

Full source / further reading.

This extends the meaning-and-evidence distinction without settling the category of photography for every purpose.

Printable handout:

Download the supported reading PDF.