

**USE2312: Nationalism and the Arts**

**Sem 2, AY 2019/20    A/P Ryan**

**Applying John Berger's ideas to the painting *Here They Come!***

John Berger, in his essay 'Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible', mentions that "painting is, first, an affirmation of the visible which surrounds us and which continually appears and disappears."<sup>1</sup> He goes on to say that "Every authentic painting demonstrates a collaboration"<sup>2</sup> between the artist and the "model" (the physical object being captured in the painting), which becomes a "criterion of judging works of any style"<sup>3</sup>. By making the above claims, Berger establishes what the artist can see in the physical world (the "existent" as he occasionally terms) and his collaboration with it as central subjects of the artwork. However, how is this theory applicable when subjects not captured in the artwork – the "invisible" and the "non-existent" – are intrinsic to the artwork too? By looking at the painting *Here They Come!* (1965) by Singaporean artist Koeh Sia Yong, this essay examines the importance of both the "visible" and the "invisible", and how Berger's theory fits into the examination. Although there is an apparent tension between the two, Berger's concept of "likeness" of an object can help explain how the "invisible" too can become central to the artwork.

On looking at the painting *Here They Come!*, certainly the "visible" – that is, what Sia Yong portrays on the canvas – is central to the artwork and the narrative it made me perceive. The

---

<sup>1</sup> John Berger, "Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible (for Yves)" in *The Shape of a Pocket* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> Berger, "Theory of the Visible", 14.

<sup>3</sup> Berger, "Theory of the Visible", 19.

painting depicts a crowd of people – everyday market-goers – looking with apprehension towards an unidentified subject which cannot be seen in the painting itself. Be it the vendors who seem ready to retreat or the scared little girl hugging her mother, there is a general atmosphere of fear and frustration, and the painting strives to find the “permanence”<sup>4</sup> of this “disappearing” moment. Similar to what Berger says about all epochs co-existing in the “realm of the visible”<sup>5</sup>, I could immediately imagine myself in the shoes of those in the canvas – two consciences connected across time. The level of detail Sia Yong captures – from the tense muscles of the closest vendor to the expressions of the most distant persons – and the lifelikeness of the painting are aspects Berger closely associates with collaboration.<sup>6</sup> This reaffirmed the same sense of urgency as the one being captured, strengthening the painting’s narrative.

However, an equally important component of the painting’s narrative is ignored by Berger’s theory of the visible: the unidentified subject the artist ambiguously refers to as “They” in the title. As soon as I engaged with the painting, I felt the presence of two parties in the narrative. The visible, which is the people depicted in the painting, is escaping the invisible, which is the unidentified subject every single person in the painting is facing towards. Leaving the invisible’s identity open to interpretation made the painting more engaging since it was a question which could really change the narrative expressed. My gaze constantly kept shifting to the bottom right corner to determine who the unidentified subject is – is it the authorities disbanding an illegal gathering, or is it another violent actor aiming to harm an innocent group of people? Yet Berger’s theory fails to consider the importance of the role the “non-existent”

---

<sup>4</sup> Berger, “Theory of the Visible”, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Berger, “Theory of the Visible”, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Berger, “Theory of the Visible”, 14.

and the “invisible” can play in the artwork. Even though the artist never collaborates with the “non-existent” according to Berger, I felt it “participating” in the painting, and Berger closely associates participation with collaboration.<sup>7</sup>

Resolving the contestation between the “visible” and “invisible” as central subjects requires reconsidering some of Berger’s claims, although Berger does offer an explanation worth exploring in his essay. He talks briefly about the concept of “likeness” – the aura an object leaves behind when it ceases to exist. “When a person dies, they leave behind... an emptiness, a space: the space has contours and is different for each person mourned... A likeness is something left behind invisibly.”, he says.<sup>8</sup> By talking about “likeness” with reference to a portrait he was trying to paint, though, he likely means that the “likeness” can help the artist paint an object without constantly seeing the object. However, the idea of an aura left behind by subjects not in the painting can certainly help in explaining the role of the “invisible” in *Here They Come!*. The unidentified subject, by the virtue of being present near the visible, leaves an aura of itself in the painting too. The “invisible” can have an important role in the artwork and its narrative, and to flesh out a resolution might require by reading more of Berger’s essays and getting more insights on his theory.

(Word Count: 750)  
Chaitanya Baranwal  
A0184716X

---

<sup>7</sup> Berger, “Theory of the Visible”, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Berger, “Theory of the Visible”, 17-18.

### **Bibliography**

Berger, John. "Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible" in *The Shape of a Pocket*, 9-24.

London: Bloomsbury, 2001.

Koch, Sia Yong. *Here They Come!*, Oil on Canvas, 1965, National Gallery Singapore,

<https://www.nationalgallery.sg/artworks/artwork-detail/2002-00423/here-they-come>.