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Response Paper I: Ways of Seeing

John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* asks us to think about how view the world and particularly the past through artworks. Berger argues that the way we view these pieces of art has changed from the way the people of the paintings time viewed them as “the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.” (Berger 21) This can be applied when doing historical textual research as well and should be taken in consideration when it comes to my own project. My aim is to look at historical records, namely books, and find the ways in which ways storytelling and folklore connect to community. As I will be looking at these pieces of the past, it will be hard not to contrast them from my own notions of the world, both the now and the historic. As I look at how and why the myths of the past came to be, it will be important to put push to past my own cosmologies so that I may relate to those of the past. Berger talks about how an artwork “spiritual value” has changed from having religious or magical meaning due to modern society largely rejecting them both (21) and that can be applied to works of Scottish myth in a time when the world was explained increasingly through the intermarriage between of past pagan beliefs and the rising Christian faith.

One of the issues that Berger talks about is the problem of “mystification” when discussing pieces of art and “explaining what should otherwise be obvious.” (11) This is an issue I fear I might come across when examining folklore of the past. Often when we look at myths, we ascribe meanings to them that fit what we know of the world, and the ones that last are from moral lessons that we can still relate to today. Berger mentions that when we look at pieces of art we see parallels between (and with stories in my case) people of then and now “so far as it corresponds to our own observations of people, gestures, faces, [and] institutions.” (14). This is essential to keep in mind when researching particularly into the why of folklore and attempt to connect the history and mythology to the anthropological. The reasons to have the potential to out of my own realm and while it is okay to make comparisons with my own experiences, it will be important to keep in mind the relevance of morality at the time of the piece I am examining. However, it will also be important to keep in mind that not all historical experiences, pieces or ideas are equal or complementary to each other. Berger rights that mystification is done because a “privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes” (11) and therefore its important to keep in mind just who is telling the pieces of history I am reading.

For my final project I plan to convert what I have derived from my research on the connections between storytelling and mythology to people and community in order to rewrite or reinvent these pieces of folklore where figures from past historical myths deal with modern problems such as climate change, dating and technology. In doing this, I plan to combine the magic of the past with the scientific rational of today. Before I can do this, I hope to have come to an understanding the reasoning and meaning behind the art of folklore and storytelling rather than what Berger calls “an atmosphere of entirely bogus religiosity” (21) that is often associated when viewing relics of the past. Berger argues that “the past is never there waiting to be discovered [or] to be recognized for exactly what it is” (11) and so through my research I hope to put aside my own clouded reasonings and look at the pieces for what they were rather than only what they mean to me today.

Works Cited

Berger, John, et al. *Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth: BBC and Penguin Books, 1977.