John Berger and Aaron Devor: Questioning Gender Stereotypes

John Berger, an English art critic, wrote “From Ways of Seeing” and Aaron Devor, a professor of sociology and the current Research Chair in Transgender Studies at the University of Victoria, wrote “Becoming Members of Society: Learning the Social Meanings of Gender”. These authors both discuss gender stereotypes, but in different context. Berger uses paintings to support his ideas whereas Devor uses scientific studies to back his opinion. Berger claims that traditional European nude portraits depict how women were and are being objectified in a male dominant society. Devor argues that in a gender binary society, people influence children’s conception of gender identity, and questioning society is the ultimate goal. For both writers, their main purpose in writing these essays is that the reader ponders and contemplates their main arguments. Devor provokes questions about gender being binary and Berger critiques objectifying women.

One way that Berger argues women were objectified in European nude portraits is through a portrait of Nell Gwynne (a king’s mistress). The painting shows her looking at the spectator while laying naked on a chair with a child standing next to her. Berger views this portrait as a woman who is submissive to the owner’s feelings or demands. (The owner of both the woman and the painting.) Berger writes that the woman is seen in an objectified manner and when the king showed the painting to others, his guests envied him. Berger’s aim in
discussing this portrait and critiquing it is that the reader may disagree with his claim that she is being objectified and question it. A person reading his essay might ask: what if the woman did not feel depersonalized and submissive? Perhaps, she felt empowered and confident, and when the king showed the painting to others she was prideful of her body as opposed to shameful. Berger is not simply making this argument to have people agree, he hopes to stimulate thought in the reader.

In Devor’s essay, he claims that children begin to settle into a gender identity between the age of eighteen months and two years. He states, “Generally, it is not until children are five to seven years old that they become convinced that they are permanent members of their gender grouping” (Devor, 43). The word “convinced” implies someone influenced the child. He argues that those closest to children (parents, siblings, guardians), become prominent in the formation of one’s self-image and one’s ideals and goals. Like Berger, Devor makes this claim to provoke thought. A lot of things can influence a child. The society a child is born into will play a huge role in shaping their views on the world, especially gender. Devor’s statement suggests that gender is binary but in fact he aims to show the reader that it does not have to be black or white. He intends to have the reader question the social norms he mentions.

Another way that both Berger and Devor attempt to encourage contemplation is through the idea of male power. Berger states at the end of his essay that women are depicted in a different way from men because women are designed to flatter men. He is making the claim that society is run by men and has been for a long time. Even though Berger’s essay primarily refers to the renaissance, the arguments he makes are still seen in societies around the world today. Berger’s claim can be supported by a study Devor discusses where adults were
exposed to infants whose sex was not told to them. When the adults assumed a sex for a child, they mostly assumed the child to be male. Devor mentions this study to shed light on two things: one, that society assumes all persons must either be male or female, and two, that maleness is dominant in North American society.

In both, “From Ways of Seeing” and “Becoming Members of Society: Learning the Social Meanings of Gender” the authors purpose is to urge the reader to question social norms, more specifically, gender norms. Berger discusses the way women are treated in society based on the portraits he critiques. Devor argues that gender is viewed as binary with the support of scientific studies. After looking deeper into each author’s claims, it is clear that their purpose is geared towards pointing out flaws in society. Berger hopes that a reader questions his essay and takes conscious action to not objectify women. Devor not only hopes the reader questions his essay but that children question gender norms as well. If children did not question the way they were raised and challenge their significant other’s morals and values, then they will believe in the same stereotypes society has shown them.

Works Cited
