

Staging a Critical Conversation as a Counterargument

1. **Stage critical conversations**, discussions in which your sources interact with you and each other. They may be supportive, oppositional, or simply have different points of view. This is a proactive way to integrate sources.
2. **Stay in charge**—don't let the sources take over! This is *your* paper, and your ideas must never go silent.
 - a. **Write claim sentences** in your own voice, even if the rest of the paragraph is all about other people's ideas.
 - b. **Paraphrase more than quote**, so you are putting your sources' ideas in your own words.
 - c. **Always introduce and comment** when you bring paraphrases and quotations into your paper. Show how they relate to *your* point.
3. **Know your sources' POSITIONS!** If you don't know what they are arguing, what they think, then you can't have a conversation with them.
4. **Example:** [Berger, J. \(1972\) *Ways of Seeing*, pp. 106-108](#): John Berger stages a conversation about [Gainsborough's *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*](#) (c1750) with Sir Kenneth Clark and Lawrence Gowing, two art historians whose positions he knows well—and opposes. **When you stage a conversation as a counterargument, give yourself worthy foes, not straw men.**

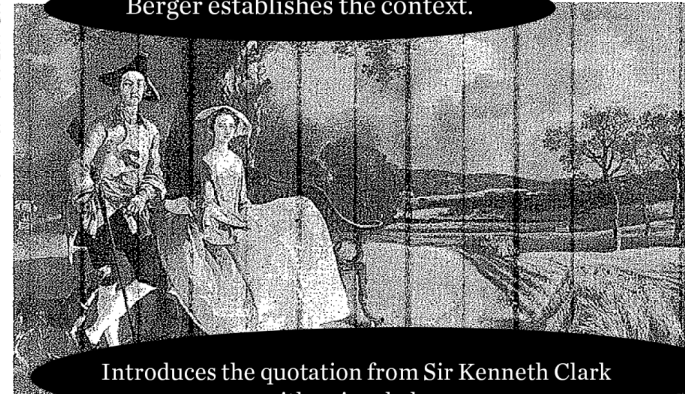


Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

Nevertheless the special relation between oil painting and property did play a certain role even in the development of landscape painting. Consider the well-known example of Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews*.

Berger establishes the context.

MR AND MRS ANDREWS
BY GAINSBOROUGH 1727-1788



Introduces the quotation from Sir Kenneth Clark with a signal phrase.

Kenneth Clark* has written about Gainsborough and this canvas:

At the very beginning of his career his pleasure in what he saw inspired him to put into his pictures backgrounds as sensitively observed as the corn-field in which are seated Mr and Mrs Andrews. This enchanting work is painted with such love and mastery that we should have expected Gainsborough to go further in the same direction; but he gave up direct painting, and evolved the melodious style of picture-making by which he is best known. His recent biographers have thought that the business of portrait painting left him no time to make studies from nature, and they have quoted his famous letter about being 'sick of portraits and wishing to take his Viol de Gamba and walk off to some sweet village where he can paint landscapes', to support the view that he would have been a naturalistic landscape painter if he had had the opportunity. But the Viol de Gamba letter is only part of Gainsborough's Rousseauism. His real opinions on the subject are contained in a letter to a patron who had been so

* Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (John Murray, London)

Citation for the Clark quote.

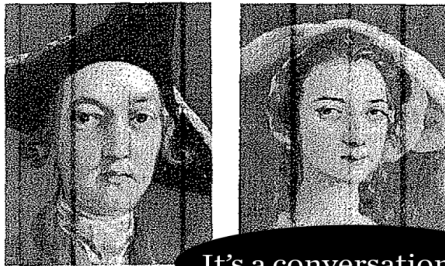
and Penguin Books, 1972.

Clark quote continues. blah, blah, blah

simple as to ask him for a painting of his park: 'Mr Gainsborough presents his humble respects to Lord Hardwicke, and shall always think it an honour to be employed in anything for His Lordship; but with regard to *real* views from Nature in this country, he has never seen any place that affords a subject equal to the poorest imitations of Gaspar or Claude.'

Why did Lord Hardwicke want a picture of his park? Why did Mr and Mrs Andrews commission a portrait of themselves with a recognizable landscape of their own land as background?

They are not a couple in Nature as Rousseau imagined nature. They are landowners and their proprietary attitude towards what surrounds them is visible in their stance and their expressions.



It's a conversation!

Professor Lawrence Gowing has protested indignantly against the implication that Mr and Mrs Andrews were interested in property:

Before John Berger manages to interpose himself again between us and the visible meaning of a good picture, may I point out that there is evidence to confirm that Gainsborough's Mr and Mrs Andrews were doing something more with their stretch of country than merely owning it. The explicit theme of a contemporary and precisely analogous design by Gainsborough's mentor Francis Hayman suggests that the people in such pictures were engaged in philosophic enjoyment of 'the great Principle ... the genuine Light of uncorrupted and unpervverted Nature.'

107

Now Berger comments on the quote. He is talking back to Clark.

Another stuffy old art historian is introduced to the discussion with another signal phrase and quotation.

Immediately after the quotation, Berger interprets it and engages with it as a counterargument.

The professor's argument is worth quoting because it is so striking an illustration of the disingenuousness that bedevils the subject of art history. Of course it is very possible that Mr and Mrs Andrews were engaged in the philosophic enjoyment of unpervverted Nature. But this in no way precludes them from being at the same time proud landowners. In most cases the possession of private land was the precondition for such philosophic enjoyment – which was not uncommon among the landed gentry. Their enjoyment of 'uncorrupted and unpervverted nature' did not, however, usually include the nature of other men. The sentence of poaching at that time was deportation. If a man stole a potato he risked a public whipping ordered by the magistrate who would be a landowner. There were very strict property limits to what was considered *natural*.

The point being made is that, among the pleasures their portrait gave to Mr and Mrs Andrews, was the pleasure of seeing themselves depicted as landowners and this pleasure was enhanced by the ability of oil paint to render their land in all its substantiality. And this is an observation which needs to be made, precisely because the cultural history we are normally taught pretends that it is an unworthy one.

By anticipating the objections of two prestigious experts and refuting them, Berger strengthens his own argument. The critical conversation that he staged supports his thesis.

p. 108

Gowing's idea that the couple "were engaged in philosophic enjoyment of ... uncorrupted and unpervverted Nature" (107) fits with Clarke's claim that Gainsborough not only wanted to paint more from nature, but that this was part of a deeper Rousseauian philosophy (106-7). Perhaps so, Berger responds, but it doesn't preclude the couple from glorying in their ownership of a magnificent estate (108). Note that he concedes a point in the counterargument—"Of course it is very possible that ..." (208)—and then explains why they are otherwise wrong and he is right. As the convener of the conversation, Berger gets the last word.