

effects of visual images. But the most exciting, startling and perceptive critics of visual images don't in the end depend entirely on a sound methodology, I think. They also depend on the pleasure, thrills, fascination, wonder, fear or revulsion of the person looking at the images and then writing about them. Successful interpretation depends on a passionate engagement with what you see. Use your methodology to discipline your passion, not to deaden it.



researching visual materials

towards a critical visual methodology

Choosing a particular research method depends on all sorts of factors. This chapter examines the factors related to the basic analytical approach you adopt in relation to visual images:

- It discusses some debates about the importance of the visual to contemporary Western societies.
- It offers a broad analytical framework for understanding how images become meaningful.
- It suggests some criteria for a critical approach to visual materials.
- It places different methodologies in that framework, to begin to suggest which methods might be best suited for which kinds of analysis.
- It offers some practical suggestions for referencing and reproducing images in your final work.

1 an introductory survey of 'the visual'

Over the last two or three decades, the way in which many social scientists understand social life has shifted. This shift is often described as the 'cultural turn'. That is, 'culture' has become a crucial means by which many social scientists understand social processes, social identities, and social change and conflict. Culture is a complex concept, but, in very broad terms, the result of its deployment has been that social scientists are now very often interested in the ways in which social life is constructed through the ideas that people have about it, and the practices that flow from those ideas. To quote one of the major contributors to this shift, Stuart Hall:

Culture

Culture, it is argued, is not so much a set of things – novels and paintings or TV programmes or comics – as a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings – the ‘giving and taking of meaning’ – between the members of a society or group . . . Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is around them, and ‘making sense’ of the world, in broadly similar ways. (Hall, 1997a: 2)

Those meanings may be explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious. They may be felt as truth or as fantasy, science or common sense; and they may be conveyed through everyday speech, elaborate rhetoric, high art, tv soap operas, dreams, movies or muzak; and different groups in a society will make sense of the world in different ways. Whatever form they take, these made meanings structure the way people behave – the way you and I behave – in our everyday lives.

This sort of argument can take very diverse forms. But recently, many writers addressing these issues have argued that the visual is central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western societies. It is now often suggested that much meaning is conveyed by visual images. We are, of course, surrounded by different sorts of visual technologies – photography, film, video, digital graphics, television, acrylics, for example – and the images they show us – tv programmes, advertisements, snapshots, public sculpture, movies, surveillance video footage, newspaper pictures, paintings. All these different sorts of technologies and images offer views of the world; they render the world in visual terms. But this rendering, even by photographs, is never innocent. These images are never transparent windows on to the world. They interpret the world; they display it in very particular ways. Thus a distinction is sometimes made between **vision** and **visuality**. **Vision** is what the human eye is physiologically capable of seeing (although it must be noted that ideas about that capability have changed historically and will most likely continue to change: see Crary, 1992). **Visuality**, on the other hand, refers to way in which vision is constructed in various ways: ‘how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein’ (Foster, 1988a: ix). Another phrase with very similar connotations to **visuality** is **scopic regime**. Both terms refer to the ways in which both what is seen and how it is seen are culturally constructed.

For some writers, the visual is the most fundamental of all senses. Gordon Fyfe and John Law (1988: 2), for example, claim that ‘depiction, picturing and seeing are ubiquitous features of the process by which most human beings come to know the world as it really *is* for them’, and John Berger (1972: 7) suggests that this is because ‘seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak’. (Clearly these writers pay little attention to those who are born blind.) Other writers, however, prefer to historicise the importance of the visual, tracing what they see as the increasing saturation of Western societies by visual images. Many claim that this process has reached unprecedented levels, so that Westerners now

Ocularcentrism

interact with the world mainly through how we see it. Martin Jay (1993) has used the term **ocularcentrism** to describe the apparent centrality of the visual to contemporary Western life.

This narrative of the increasing importance of the visual to contemporary Western societies is part of a wider analysis of the shift from premodernity to modernity, and from modernity to postmodernity (for example, see Mirzoeff, 1999: 1–33). It is often suggested – or assumed – that in premodern societies, visual images were not especially important, partly because there were so few of them in circulation. This began to change with the onset of modernity. In particular, it is suggested that modern forms of knowledge depend on a scopic regime that equates seeing with knowledge. Chris Jenks (1995), for example, makes this case in an essay entitled ‘The centrality of the eye in western culture’, arguing that ‘looking, seeing and knowing have become perilously intertwined’ so that ‘the modern world is very much a “seen” phenomenon’ (Jenks, 1995: 1, 2).

We daily experience and perpetuate the conflation of the ‘seen’ with the ‘known’ in conversation through the commonplace linguistic appendage of ‘do you see?’ or ‘see what I mean?’ to utterances that seem to require confirmation, or, when seeking opinion, by inquiring after people’s ‘views’. (Jenks, 1995: 3)

Barbara Maria Stafford (1991), an historian of images used in the sciences, has argued that, in a process beginning in the eighteenth century, the construction of scientific knowledges about the world has become more and more based on images rather than on written texts; Jenks (1995) suggests that it is the valorization of science in Western cultures which has allowed everyday understandings to make the same connection between seeing and knowing. However, that connection was also made in other fields of modern practice. Richard Rorty (1980), for example, traces the development of this conflation of seeing with knowing to the intersection of several ideas central to eighteenth-century philosophy. Judith Adler (1989) examines tourism and argues that between 1600 and 1800 the travel of European elites was defined increasingly as a visual practice, based first on ‘an overarching scientific ideology that cast even the most humble tourists as part of . . . the impartial survey of all creation’ (Adler, 1989: 24), and later on a particular appreciation of spectacular visual and artistic beauty. John Urry (1990) has sketched the outline of a rather different ‘tourist gaze’ which he argues is typical of the mass tourism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see also Pratt, 1992). Other writers have made other arguments for the importance of the visual to modern societies. The work of Michel Foucault (1977) explores the way in which many nineteenth-century institutions depended on various forms of surveillance (Chapters 6 and 7 here examine the methodological implications of his work); and in his study of nineteenth-century world fairs and exhibitions, Timothy Mitchell (1988) shows how European societies represented the whole

world as an exhibition. In the twentieth century, Guy Debord (1983) claims that the world has turned into a 'society of the spectacle', and Paul Virilio (1994) argues that new visualizing technologies have created 'the vision machine' in which we are all caught.

Thus it has been argued that modernity is ocularcentric. It is argued too that the visual is equally central to postmodernity; Nicholas Mirzoeff (1998: 4), for example, has proclaimed that 'the postmodern is a visual culture'. However, in postmodernity, it is often argued, the modern relation between seeing and true knowing has been broken. Thus Mirzoeff (1998) suggests that postmodernity is ocularcentric not simply because visual images are more and more common, nor because knowledges about the world are increasingly articulated visually, but because we interact more and more with totally constructed visual experiences. Thus the modern connection between seeing and knowledge is stretched to breaking point in postmodernity:

Seeing is a great deal more than believing these days. You can buy an image of your house taken from an orbiting satellite or have your internal organs magnetically imaged. If that special moment didn't come out quite right in your photography, you can digitally manipulate it on your computer. At New York's Empire State Building, the queues are longer for the virtual reality New York Ride than for the lifts to the observation platforms. Alternatively, you could save yourself the trouble by catching the entire New York skyline, rendered in attractive pastel colours, at the New York, New York resort in Las Vegas. This virtual city will shortly be joined by Paris Las Vegas, imitating the already carefully manipulated image of the city of light. (Mirzoeff, 1998: 1)

Simulacrum This is what Jean Baudrillard (1988) some time ago dubbed the **simulacrum**. Baudrillard argued that in postmodernity it was no longer possible to make a distinction between the real and the unreal; images had become detached from any certain relation to a real world with the result that we now live in a scopic regime dominated by simulations, or simulacra.

This story about the increasing extent and changing nature of the ocularcentrism in modernity and postmodernity is not without its critics, however. Two points of debate, for example, are the history and geography of this account: perhaps visual images of various kinds have always been important, and to all sorts of societies. Jeffrey Hamburger (1997), for example, argues that visual images were central to certain kinds of premodern, medieval spirituality, and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1998) have argued forcefully against the Eurocentrism that pervades many discussions of 'the visual'. The work of Hamburger (1997) and Shohat and Stam (1998), among others, makes it clear that if a narrative of increasing ocularcentrism in the West can be told, it must be much more nuanced, historically and geographically, than has so far been the case (see also Brennan and Jay, 1996). Moreover, there are also debates about the social relations within which these visualities are embedded, and particularly

about the effects of simulacra. Baudrillard, for example, has often been accused of uncritically celebrating the simulacrum without regard for the often very unequal social relations that can be articulated through it, and the work of Donna Haraway (1991) is a salutary reminder of what is at stake in contemporary ocularcentrism. Like many others, Haraway (1991) notes the contemporary proliferation of visualizing technologies in scientific and everyday use, and she characterizes the scopic regime associated with these technologies thus: 'Vision in this technological feast becomes unregulated gluttony; all perspective gives way to infinitely mobile vision, which no longer seems just mythically about the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere, but to have put the myth into ordinary practice' (Haraway, 1991: 189). Haraway is concerned to specify the social power relations that are articulated through this particular form of visuality, however. She argues that contemporary, unregulated visual gluttony is available to only a few people and institutions, in particular those that are part of the 'history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy' (Haraway, 1991: 188). She argues that what this visuality does is to produce specific visions of social difference – of hierarchies of class, 'race', gender, sexuality, and so on – while itself claiming not to be part of that hierarchy and thus to be universal. It is because this ordering of difference depends on a distinction between those who claim to see with universal relevance, and those who are seen and categorized in particular ways, that Haraway claims it is intimately related to the oppressions and tyrannies of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy and so on. Part of Haraway's critical project, then, is to examine in detail how certain institutions mobilize certain forms of visuality to see, and to order, the world. This dominant visuality denies the validity of other ways of visualizing social difference, but Haraway insists that there are indeed other ways of seeing the world, and she is especially interested in efforts to see social difference in non-hierarchical ways. For Haraway, as for many other writers, then, the dominant scopic regime of (post)modernity is neither an historical inevitability, nor is it uncontested. There are different ways of seeing the world, and the critical task is to differentiate between the social effects of those different visions.

The particular forms of representation produced by specific scopic regimes are important to understand, then, because they are intimately bound into social power relations. Haraway's (1991) argument makes clear the necessity of understanding what social relations produce, and are reproduced by, what forms of visuality, and the next section explores this argument more fully.

2 'visual culture': the social conditions and effects of visual objects

Paying attention to the effects of images is fundamental to a new field of study that has been emerging over the past few years, perhaps itself

Visual culture

another symptom of the importance of images in the contemporary period. The focus of this field is something called **visual culture**, although some writers whose work engages with the visual are highly sceptical that this is a useful term (see the debate in the journal *October* in 1996). Visual culture is not then a term to be used carelessly. There are, however, five aspects of the recent literature that engages with visual culture which I think are valuable for thinking about the social effects of images.

First, there is an insistence that images themselves do something. In the words of Carol Armstrong (1996: 28), for example, an image is 'at least potentially a site of resistance and recalcitrance, of the irreducibly particular, and of the subversively strange and pleasurable' (Armstrong, 1996: 28; see also Stafford, 1996). This kind of visual resistance, recalcitrance, particularity, strangeness or pleasure may be difficult to articulate; indeed, certain aspects of visual images – the colours of an oil painting, for example, or what Barthes (1982) called the *punctum* of a photograph (see Chapter 4, section 3.3) – may have to undergo a sort of translation when they are written about. This has led some writers to argue that the visual is not the same as language. This is a claim which could have important implications for some of the methods this book will discuss; semiology, examined in Chapter 4, and the sort of discourse analysis examined in Chapter 6, are both methods based on the analysis of language rather than imagery. However, it is important not to forget that knowledges are conveyed through all sorts of different media, including senses other than the visual, and that visual images very often work in conjunction with other kinds of representations. It is very unusual, for example, to encounter a visual image unaccompanied by any text at all, whether spoken or written (Armstrong, 1998; Wollen, 1970: 118). Even the most abstract painting in a gallery will have a written label on the wall giving certain information about its making, and in certain sorts of galleries there'll be a sheet of paper giving a price too, and these make a difference to how spectators will see that painting. So it's certainly correct, I think, that visual modes of conveying meaning are not the same as written modes; and thus that, as W.J.T. Mitchell (1994: 16) says, 'visual experience or "visual literacy" might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality'. However, because visual objects are always embedded into a range of other texts, some of which will be visual and some of which will be written and all of which intersect with each other, I find debates about the precise difference between words and images rather sterile. What is much more important, I think, is simply to acknowledge that visual images can be powerful and seductive in their own right.

The second point I take from the literature on (or against) 'visual culture' is its concern for the way in which images visualize (or render invisible) social difference. As Fyfe and Law (1988: 1) say, 'a depiction is never just an illustration . . . it is the site for the construction and depiction of social difference'. One of the central aims of 'the cultural turn' in the social sciences is to argue that social categories are not natural but instead

are constructed. These constructions can take visual form. This point has been made most forcefully by feminist and postcolonial writers who have studied the ways femininity and blackness have been visualized. An example would be Paul Gilroy's (1987: 57–9) discussion of a poster used by the Conservative Party in Britain's 1983 General Election, reproduced in Figure 1.1.

The poster shows a young black man in a suit, with 'LABOUR SAYS HE'S BLACK. TORIES SAY HE'S BRITISH' as its headline text. Gilroy's discussion is detailed but his main point is that the poster offers a choice between being black and being British, not only in its text but also in its image. The fact that the black man is pictured wearing a suit suggests to Gilroy that 'blacks are being invited to forsake all that marks them out as culturally distinct before real Britishness can be guaranteed' (Gilroy,

1987: 59). Gilroy is thus suggesting that this poster asks its viewers not to see blackness. However, he also points out that the poster depends on other stereotyped images (which it does not show) of young black men, particularly as muggers, to make its point about the acceptability of this besuited man. This poster thus plays in complex ways with both visible and invisible signs of racial difference. Hence Fyfe and Law's general prescription for a critical approach to the ways images can picture social power relations:

To understand a visualisation is thus to enquire into its provenance and into the social work that it does. It is to note its principles of inclusion and exclusion, to detect the roles that it makes available, to understand the way in which they are distributed, and to decode the hierarchies and differences that it naturalises. (Fyfe and Law, 1988: 1)

Looking carefully at images, then, entails, among other things, thinking about how they offer very particular visions of social categories such as class, gender, race, sexuality, able-bodiedness, and so on.

Third, writers on visual culture, among others, are concerned not only with how images look, but how they are looked at. That is, they argue that what is important about images is not simply the image itself, but how it is



Figure 1.1
Conservative Party
election poster
(Gilroy, 1987: 58)

Ways of seeing

seen by particular spectators who look in particular ways. In 1972, John Berger wrote and illustrated a book to accompany a television series called *Ways of Seeing*, and he elaborated that phrase ways of seeing in a manner very similar to the concerns of more recent writers. His argument is important because he makes clear that images of social difference work not simply by what they show but also by the kind of seeing that they invite. He uses the expression 'ways of seeing' to refer to the fact that 'we never look just at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves' (Berger, 1972: 9). His best known example is that of the genre of female nude painting in Western art. He reproduces many examples of that genre (see Figure 1.2), pointing out as he does so the particular ways they represent women: as unclothed, as vain, as passive, as sexually alluring, as a spectacle to be assessed.

Berger insists though on who it is that does the assessing, who this kind of image of woman was meant to allure:

In the average European oil painting of the nude, the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the painting and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. (Berger, 1972: 54)

Thus for Berger, understanding this particular genre of painting means understanding not only its representation of femininity, but its construction of masculinity too. And these representations are in their turn understood as part of a wider cultural construction of gendered difference. To quote Berger again:

One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between women and men but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (Berger, 1972: 47)

While later critics would want to modify aspects of Berger's argument – most obviously by noting that he assumes heterosexuality in his discussion of masculinity and femininity – many critics would concur with his general understanding of the connection between image and spectator. Images work by producing effects every time they are looked at. Taking an image seriously, then, also involves thinking about how it positions you, its viewer, in relation to it.

Fourth, there is the emphasis in the very term 'visual culture' on the embeddedness of visual images in a wider culture (Mirzoeff, 1999: 22–6). Now, 'culture', as Raymond Williams (1976) famously noted, is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. It has many

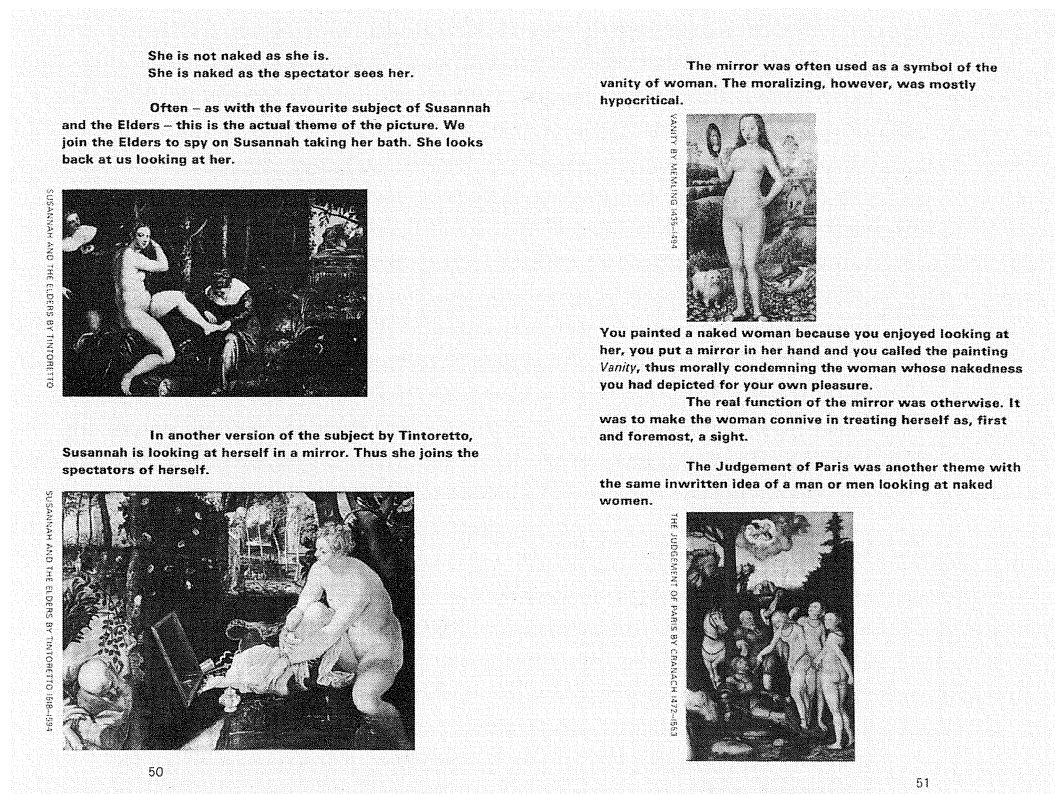


Figure 1.2
Double-page
spread from John
Berger's *Ways of
Seeing* (Berger,
1972: 50–1)

connotations. Most pertinent to this discussion is the meaning it began to be given in various anthropological books written towards the end of the nineteenth century. In this usage, culture meant something like 'a whole way of life', and even from the brief discussion in this chapter so far you can see that some current writers are using the term visual culture in just this broad sense. Indeed, the term 'visual culture' was first used by Svetlana Alpers (1983: xxv) precisely to emphasize the importance of visual images of all kinds to seventeenth century Dutch society, and her example has been followed by, among others, Stafford (1996: 4) in her argument that new visualizing technologies have superseded written texts as 'the richest, most fascinating modality for conveying ideas', and by Karal Ann Marling (1994) in her book on the influence of television and its associated way of seeing in 1950s North America. In this sort of work, it is argued that a particular, historically specific visuality was central to a particular, ocular-centric culture. In using the notion of culture in this broad sense, however, certain analytical questions become difficult to ask. In particular, culture as whole way of life can slip rather easily into a notion of culture as simply a whole, and the issue of difference becomes obscured. Stafford's (1996) celebration of the visual in 'our' society has been criticized by Hal Foster (1996) in just these terms. Stafford never specifies who the 'we' to which she refers actually is, and she thus ignores this visuality's possible exclusions as well as the particularities of its inclusions.

In order to be able to deal with questions of social difference and the power relations that sustain them, then, a more nuanced notion of culture is required. But to understand culture through another one of its definitions, culture as artefacts, will not entirely do either. Some definitions of visual culture do claim that visual culture simply means visual objects: 'visual culture can be roughly defined as those material artefacts, buildings and images, plus time-based media and performances, produced by human labour and imagination, which serve aesthetic, symbolic, ritualistic or ideological-political ends, and/or practical functions, and which address the sense of sight to a significant extent' (Walker and Chaplin, 1997: 1–2). The difficulty with this definition is that it can neglect the important notion of ways of seeing. If Nancy Condee's (1995: x) definition – that 'visual culture is a process and not a thing, a particular way of perceiving the object and not the particular object perceived' – goes to the other extreme and dismisses the facticity of visual things entirely, her emphasis on visual culture as a visual relation between an object and a spectator is crucial. Visual objects mobilize certain ways of seeing.

Culture

If culture cannot be thought of as a singular whole, nor as constituted simply by objects, then, it is more helpful to think of it as the range of meaningful social practices in which visual images' effects are embedded, just as many social scientists are now doing (for an early example of this sort of approach, see Becker, 1982). I have already quoted Stuart Hall (1997a: 2) saying that culture is 'a process, a set of practices', and Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell (1999: xi) make a similar claim in their account of visual culture as a 'socio-historical realm of interpretative practices'. Visual images are made, and may be moved, displayed, sold, censored, venerated, discarded, stared at, hidden, recycled, glanced at, damaged, destroyed, touched, reworked. Images are made and used in all sorts of ways by different people for different reasons, and these makings and uses are crucial to the meanings an image carries. An image may have its own effects, but these are always mediated by the many and various uses to which it is put. An image will depend for its effects on a certain way of seeing, as Berger assumed in relation to female nude painting. But this effect is always embedded in particular cultural practices that are far more specific than 'a way of life'. Berger, for example, talks about the ways in which nude paintings were commissioned and then displayed by their owners in his discussion of the way of seeing which they express. Describing a seventeenth-century English example of the genre, he writes:

Nominally it might be a *Venus and Cupid*. In fact it is a portrait of one of the king's mistresses, Nell Gwynne . . . [Her] nakedness is not, however, an expression of her own feelings; it is a sign of her submission to the owner's feelings or demands. (The owner of both the woman and the painting.) The painting, when the king showed it to others, demonstrated this submission and his guests envied him. (Berger, 1972: 52)

It was through this kind of use, by those particular sorts of people interpreting it in that kind of way, that this kind of painting achieved its effects. The seeing of an image thus always takes place in a particular social context that mediates its impact. It also always takes place in a specific location with its own particular practices. That location may be a king's chamber, a Hollywood cinema studio, an avant-garde art gallery, an archive, a sitting-room, a street. These different locations all have their own economies, their own disciplines, their own rules for how their particular sort of spectator should behave, and all these affect how a particular image is seen too.

Finally, much of this work in visual culture argues that it is important to remember that, just as an image may be 'a site of resistance and recalcitrance', so too might a particular audience. Not all audiences will be able or willing to respond to the way of seeing invited by a particular images and its particular practices of display (Chapter 8 will discuss this in more detail).

Thus I take five major points from current debates about visual culture as important for understanding how images work: an image may have its *own visual effects* (so it is important to look very carefully at images); these effects, through the *ways of seeing* mobilized by the image, are crucial in the production and reproduction of visions of *social difference*; but these effects always intersect with the *social context of its viewing* and the *visualities its spectators bring* to their viewing.

3 towards a critical visual methodology

Given this general approach to understanding the importance of visual images, I can now elaborate on what I think is necessary for a 'critical approach' to interpreting visual images. A critical approach:

- 1 *takes images seriously*. While this might seem rather a paradoxical point to insist on, given all the work I've just mentioned that addresses visualities and visual objects, art historians of all sorts of interpretive hues continue to complain, often rightly, that social scientists don't look at images carefully enough. And often too, social scientists tend to assume that images are simply reflections of their social 'contexts' (for a critique of this approach, see Pollock, 1988: 25–30). In contrast, I argue that it is necessary to look very carefully at visual images, and it is necessary to do so because they are not entirely reducible to their context. Visual representations have their own effects.
- 2 *thinks about the social conditions and effects of visual objects*. As Griselda Pollock (1988: 7) says, 'cultural practices do a job which has major social significance in the articulation of meanings about the world, in the negotiation of social conflicts, in the production of social subjects'. Haraway's work is exemplary here. Cultural practices like

visual representations both depend on and produce social inclusions and exclusions, and a critical account needs to address both those practices and their cultural meanings.

- 3 *considers your own way of looking at images*. If ways of seeing are historically, geographically, culturally and socially specific, then how you or I look is not natural or innocent. So it is necessary to reflect on how you as a critic of visual images are looking. As Haraway (1991: 190) says, by thinking carefully about where we see from, 'we might become answerable for what we learn how to see'. Haraway also comments that this is not a straightforward task, however (see also Rogoff, 1998; Rose, 1997), and several of the chapters will return to this issue of reflexivity in order to examine its challenges further.

The aim of this book is to give you some practical guidance on how to do these things; but I hope it is already clear from this introduction that this is not simply a technical question of method. There are also important analytical debates going on about visualities. In this book, I use these particular criteria for a critical visual methodology to evaluate both theoretical arguments and methods.

Having very briefly sketched a critical approach to images that I find useful to work with and which will structure this book's accounts of various methods, the next section will continue to explore a number of different interpretations of visual objects, not all of which are compatible with each other. The next section also has another aim, though. It will begin to offer some more practical analytical tools.

4 towards some methodological tools: sites and modalities

As the editors of *The BLOCK Reader on Visual Culture* (Bird et al., 1996) make clear, the theoretical sources which have produced the recent interest in visual culture are diverse. This section will try to acknowledge some of that diversity, while also beginning to develop a methodological framework for interpreting visual images critically.

Interpretations of visual images broadly concur that there are three **sites** at which the meanings of an image are made: the site(s) of the **production** of an image, the site of the **image** itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various **audiences**. Many of the theoretical disagreements about visual culture, visualities and visual objects can be understood as disputes over which of these is most important and why, and the following subsections will touch on some of these disagreements. I also want to suggest that these sites are complicated because there are different aspects to each of their processes. These different aspects I will call **modalities**, and I'll suggest that there are three of these that can contribute to a critical understanding of images:

- Technological** 1 **technological**. Mirzoeff (1998: 1) defines a visual technology as 'any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil paintings to television and the Internet'.
- Compositional** 2 **compositional**. When an image is made, it draws on a number of formal strategies: content, colour and spatial organization, for example. Often, particular forms of these strategies tend to occur together, so that, for example, Berger (1972) can define the Western art tradition painting of the nude in terms of its specific compositional qualities. Chapter 2 will elaborate the notion of composition.
- Social** 3 **social**. This is very much a shorthand term. What I mean it to refer to are the range of economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image and through which it is seen and used.

These modalities, since they are found at all three sites, also suggest that the distinctions between sites are less clear than my subsections here might imply.

To focus the discussion, and to give you a chance to explore how these sites and modalities intersect, I'll often refer to the photograph reproduced in Figure 1.3. Take a good look at it now and note down your immediate reactions. Then see how your views of it alter as the following subsections discuss its sites and modalities.

4.1 site i: production

All visual representations are made in one way or another, and the circumstances of their production may contribute towards the effect they have.

Some writers argue this case very strongly. Some, for example, would argue that the *technologies* used in the making of an image determine its form, meaning and effect. Clearly, visual technologies do matter to how an image looks and therefore to what it might do and what might be done to it. Here is Berger describing the uniqueness of oil painting:

What distinguishes oil painting from any other form of painting is its special ability to render the tangibility, the texture, the lustre, the solidity of what it depicts. It defines the real as that which you can put your hands on. (Berger, 1972: 88)

For a particular study it may be important to understand the technologies used in the making of particular images, and at the end of the book you will find some references which will help you do that.

In the case of the photograph here, it is perhaps important to understand what kind of camera, film and developing process the photographer was using, and what that made visually possible and what impossible. The



Figure 1.3

photograph was made in 1948, by which time cameras were relatively lightweight and film was highly sensitive to light. This meant that, unlike in earlier periods, a photographer did not have to find subjects which would stay still for seconds or even minutes in order to be pictured. By 1948, the photographer could have stumbled on this scene and 'snapped' it almost immediately. Thus part of the effect of the photograph – its apparent spontaneity, a snapshot – is enabled by the technology used.

However, another aspect of the photograph which we might be tempted to ascribe to its technology – its apparent truthfulness – has less to do with the technical capabilities of the camera and film and more to do with how photographs are understood. From its very invention, photography has been understood by some of its practitioners as a technology that simply records the way things really look. But also from the beginning, photographs have been seen as magical and strange (Slater, 1995). This debate should alert to us to the fact that notions of 'truthful' photographic representation have been constructed. Maybe we see this photograph as a snapshot of real life because we expect photos to show us snippets of truth. But this photo might have been posed: the photographer who took this one certainly posed others which nevertheless have the same 'real' look (Doisneau, 1991). Also, as Griselda Pollock (1988: 85–7) points out in her discussion of this photograph, its status as a snapshot of real life is also established in part by its content, especially the boys playing in the street, just out of focus; surely if it had been posed those boys would have been in focus? Thus the apparently technological effects on the production of a visual image need careful consideration, because some may not be straightforwardly technological at all.

The second modality of an image's production is to do with its *compositionality*. Some writers argue that it is the conditions of an image's production that govern its compositionality. This argument is perhaps most effectively made in relation to the **genre** of images into which a particular image fits (perhaps rather uneasily). Genre is a way of classifying visual images into certain groups. Images that belong to the same genre share certain features. A particular genre will share a specific set of meaningful objects and locations and, in the case of movies for example, have a limited set of narrative problematics. Thus John Berger can define 'female nude painting' as a particular genre of Western painting because these are pictures which represent naked women as passive, available and desirable through various compositional devices. A certain kind of traditional art history would see the way that a particular artist makes reference to other paintings in the same genre (and perhaps in other genres) as he or she works at a canvas as a crucial aspect of understanding the final painting. It helps to make sense of the significance of elements of an individual image if you know that some of them recur repeatedly in other images. You may need to refer to other images of the same genre in order to explicate aspects of the one you're interested in. Many books on visual images focus on one particular genre.

Genre

The photograph under consideration here fits into one genre but has connections to some others, and knowing this allows us to make sense of various aspects of this rich visual document. The genre into which the photo fits most obviously, I think, is that of 'street photography'. This is a body of work with connections to another photography genre, that of the documentary (Hamilton, 1997; see also Pryce, 1997 for a discussion of documentary photography). Documentary photography originally tended to picture poor, oppressed or marginalized individuals, often as part of reformist projects to show the horror of their lives and thus inspire change. The aim was to be as objective and accurate as possible in these depictions. However, since the apparent horror was being shown to audiences who had the power to pressure for change, documentary photography usually pictures the relatively powerless to the relatively powerful. It has thus been accused of voyeurism and worse. Street photography shares with documentary photography the desire to picture life as it apparently is. But street photography does not want its viewers to say 'oh how terrible' and maybe 'we must do something about that'. Rather, its way of seeing invites a response that is more like, 'oh how extraordinary, isn't life richly marvellous'. This seems to me to be the response that this photograph, and many others taken by the same photographer, asks for. We are meant to smile wryly at a glimpse of a relationship, exposed to us for just a second. This photograph was almost certainly made to sell to a photo-magazine like *Vu*, *Life* or *Picture Post* for publication as a visual joke, funny and not too disturbing for the readers of these magazines. This constraint on its production thus affected its genre.

The third modality of production is what I have called the *social*. Here again, there is a body of work which argues that these are the most important factors in understanding visual images. Some argue that it is the economic processes in which cultural production is embedded that shape visual imagery. One of the most eloquent exponents of this argument is David Harvey. Certain photographs and films play a key role in his 1989 book *The Condition of Postmodernity*. He argues that these visual representations exemplify postmodernity. Like many other commentators, Harvey defines postmodernity in part through the importance of visual images to postmodern culture, commenting on 'the mobilization of fashion, pop art, television and other forms of media image, and the variety of urban life styles that have become part and parcel of daily life under capitalism' (Harvey, 1989: 63). He sees the qualities of this mobilization as ephemeral, fluid, fleeting and superficial: 'there has emerged an attachment to surface rather than roots, to collage rather than in-depth work, to superimposed quoted images rather than worked surfaces, to a collapsed sense of time and space rather than solidly achieved cultural artefact' (Harvey, 1989: 61). And Harvey has an explanation for this which focuses on the latter characteristics. He suggests that contemporary capitalism is organizing itself in ways that are indeed compressing time and collapsing space. He argues that capitalism is more and more 'flexible' in

its organization of production techniques, labour markets and consumption niches, and that this has depended on the increased mobility of capital and information. Moreover, the importance of consumption niches has generated the increasing importance of advertising, style and spectacle in the selling of goods. In his Marxist account, both these characteristics are reflected in cultural objects – in their superficiality, their ephemerality – so that the latter are nothing but 'the cultural logic of late capitalism' (Harvey, 1989: 63; Jameson, 1984).

To analyse images through this lens you will need to understand contemporary economic processes in a synthetic manner. However, those writers who emphasize the importance of broad systems of production to the meaning of images sometimes deploy methodologies that pay rather little attention to the details of particular images. Harvey (1989), for example, has been accused of misunderstanding the photographs and films he interprets in his book – and of economic determinism (Deutsche, 1991).

Other accounts of the centrality of what I am calling the social to the production of images depend on rather more detailed analyses of particular industries which produce visual images. David Morley and Kevin Robins (1995), for example, focus on the audiovisual industries of Europe in their study of how those industries are implicated in contemporary constructions of 'Europeanness'. They point out that the European Union is keen to encourage a Europe-wide audiovisual industry partly on economic grounds, to compete with US and Japanese conglomerates. But they also argue that the EU has a cultural agenda too, which works at 'improving mutual knowledge among European peoples and increasing their consciousness of the life and destiny they have in common' (Morley and Robins, 1995: 3), and thus elides differences within Europe while producing certain kinds of differences between Europe and the rest of the world. Like Harvey, then, Morley and Robins pay attention to both the economic and the cultural aspects of contemporary cultural practices. Unlike Harvey, however, Morley and Robins do not reduce the latter to the former. And this is in part because they rely on a more fine-grained analytical method than Harvey, paying careful attention to particular companies and products, as well as understanding how the industry as a whole works.

Another aspect of the social production of an image is the social and/or political identities that are mobilized in its making. Peter Hamilton's (1997) discussion of the sort of photography of which Figure 1.3 is a part explores its dependence on certain postwar ideas about the French working class, for example. Here though I will focus on another social identity articulated through this particular photograph. Here is a passage from an introduction to a book on street photography that evokes the 'crazy, cockeyed' viewpoint of the street photographer:

It's like going into the sea and letting the waves break over you. You feel the power of the sea. On the street each successive wave brings a whole new cast of characters. You take wave after wave, you bathe in it. There

is something exciting about being in the crowd, in all that chance and change. It's tough out there, but if you can keep paying attention something will reveal itself, just a split second, and then there's a crazy cockeyed picture! . . . 'Tough' meant it was an uncompromising image, something that came from your gut, out of instinct, raw, of the moment, something that couldn't be described in any other way. So it was TOUGH. Tough to like, tough to see, tough to make, tough to understand. The tougher they were the more beautiful they became. It was our language. (Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, 1994: 2-3)

This passage allows us to say a bit more about the importance of a certain kind of identity to the production of the photograph under discussion here. To do street photography, it says, the photographer has to be there, in the street, tough enough to survive, tough enough to overcome the threats posed by the street. There is a kind of macho power being celebrated in that account of street photography, in its reiteration of 'toughness'. This sort of photography also endows its viewer with a kind of toughness over the image because it allows the viewer to remain in control, positioned as somewhat distant from and superior to what the image shows us. We have more information than the people pictured, and we can therefore smile at them. This particular photograph even places a window between us and its subjects; we peer at them from the same hidden vantage point just like the photographer did. There is a kind of distance established between the photographer/audience and the people photographed, then, reminiscent of the patriarchal way of seeing that has been critiqued by Haraway (1991), among others (see section 1 of this chapter). But since this toughness is required only in order to record something that will reveal itself, this passage is also an example of the photograph being seen as a truthful instrument of simple observation, and of the erasure of the specificity of the photographer himself; the photographer is there but only to carry his camera and react quickly when the moment comes, just like our photographer snapping his subject. Again, this erasure of the particularity of a visibility is what Haraway (1991) critiques as, among other things, patriarchal. It is therefore significant that of the many photographers whose work is reproduced in that book on street photography, very few are women. You need to be a man, or at least masculine, to do street photography, apparently. However, this passage's evocation of 'gut' and 'instinct' is interesting in this respect, since these are qualities of embodiment and non-rationality that are often associated with femininity. Thus, if masculinity might be said to be central to the production of street photography, it is a particular, rather complicated, kind of masculinity.

Finally, it should be noted that there is one element active at the site of production to which many social scientists interested in the visual would pay very little attention: the individual often described as the author (or artist or director or sculptor or so on) of the visual image under consideration. The notion that the most important aspect in understanding a visual image is what its maker intended to show is sometimes called

Auteur theory **auteur theory.** However, most of the recent work on visual matters is uninterested in the intentionality of an image's maker. There are a number of reasons for this (Hall, 1997b: 25; see also the focus in Chapter 2, section 3). First, as we have seen, there are those who argue that other modalities of an image's production account for its effects. Second, there are those who argue that, since the image is always made and seen in relation to other images, this wider visual context is more significant for what the image means than what the artist thought they were doing. Roland Barthes (1977: 145-6) made this argument when he proclaimed 'the death of the author'. And third, there are those who insist that the most important site at which the meaning of an image is made is not its author, or indeed its production or itself, but its audiences, who bring their own ways of seeing and other knowledges to bear on an image and in the process make their own meanings from it. So I can tell you that the man who took this photograph in 1948 was Robert Doisneau, and that information will allow you, as it allowed me, to find out more information about his life and work. But the literature I am drawing on here would not suggest that an intimate, personal biography of Doisneau is necessary in order to interpret his photographs. Instead, it would read his life, as I did, in order to understand the modalities that shaped the production of his photographs.

4.2 site ii: the image

The second site at which an image's meanings are made is the image itself. Every image has a number of formal components. As the previous section suggested, some of these components will be caused by the *technologies* used to make, reproduce or display the image. For example, the black and white tonalities of the Doisneau photo are a result of his choice of film and processing techniques. Other components of an image will depend on *social* practices. The previous section also noted how the photograph under discussion might look the way it does in part because it was made to be sold to particular magazines. More generally, the economic circumstances under which Doisneau worked were such that all his photographs were affected by them. He began working as a photographer in the publicity department of a pharmacy, and then worked for the car manufacturer Renault in the 1930s (Doisneau, 1990). Later he worked for *Vogue* and for the Alliance press agency. That is, he very often pictured things in order to get them sold: cars, fashions. And all his life he had to make images to sell; he was a freelance photographer needing to make a living from his photographs. Thus his photography showed commodities and was itself a commodity (see Ramamurthy, 1997 for a discussion of photography and commodity culture). Perhaps this accounts for his fascination with objects, with emotion, and with the emotions objects can arouse. Just like an advertiser, he was investing objects with feelings through his images, and, again like an advertiser, could not afford to offend his potential buyers.

However, as section 2 here noted, many writers argue that an image may have its own effects which exceed the constraints of its production (and reception). Some would argue, for example, that it is the particular qualities of the photographic image that make us understand its technology in particular ways, rather than the reverse; or that it is those qualities that shape the social modality in which it is embedded rather than the other way round. The modality most important to an image's own effects, therefore, is often argued to be its *compositionality*. Pollock's (1988: 85) discussion of the Doisneau photograph is very clear about the way in which aspects of its compositionality contribute towards its way of seeing (she draws on an earlier essay by Mary Ann Doane (1982)). She stresses the spatial organization of looks in the photograph, and argues that 'the photograph almost uncannily delineates the sexual politics of looking'. These are the politics of looking that Berger explored in his discussion of the Western tradition of female nude painting. 'One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*', says Berger (1972: 47). In this photograph, the man looks at an image of a woman, while another woman looks but at nothing, apparently. Moreover, as Pollock insists, the viewer of this photograph is pulled into complicity with these looks:

It is [the man's] gaze which defines the problematic of the photograph and it erases that of the woman. She looks at nothing that has any meaning for the spectator. Spatially central, she is negated in the triangulation of looks between the man, the picture of the fetishized woman and the spectator, who is thus enthralled to a masculine viewing position. To get the joke, we must be complicit with his secret discovery of something better to look at. The joke, like all dirty jokes, is at the woman's expense. (Pollock, 1988: 47)

Pollock is discussing the organization of looks in the photograph and between the photograph and us, its viewers. She argues that this aspect of its formal qualities is the most important for its effect (although she has also mentioned the effect of spontaneity created by the out-of-focus boys playing in the street behind the couple, remember).

Such discussions of the compositional modality of the site of the image can produce persuasive accounts of a photograph's way of seeing. And such accounts would refuse to explain that way of seeing by referring to its conditions of production. Thus Pollock (1988) does not discuss the gendered production of street photography and its celebration of toughness. This is because she refuses to reduce the effect of the photograph to a mere reflection of social practices elsewhere.

4.3 site iii: audiencing

You might well not agree with Pollock's interpretation of the Doisneau photograph, and I'll discuss some of the other interpretations of the image made by students in some of my classes in this section. Your disagreement,

Audiencing

though, is the final site at which the meanings and effects of an image are made, for you are an audience of that photograph and, like all audiences, you bring to it your own ways of seeing and other kinds of knowledges. John Fiske (1994) for one suggests that this is the most important site at which an image's meanings are made, and uses the term *audiencing* to refer to the process by which a visual image has its meanings renegotiated, or even rejected, by particular audiences watching in specific circumstances. Once again, I would suggest that there are three aspects to that process.

The first is the *compositionality* of the image. Several of the methods that we will encounter in this book assume that the formal arrangement of the elements of a picture will dictate how an image is seen by its audiences. Pollock assumes just this when she claims that the Doisneau image is always seen as a joke against the woman, because the organization of looks by the photograph coincides with, and reiterates, a scopic regime that allows only men to look. It is important, I think, to consider very carefully the organization of the image, because that does have an effect on the spectator who sees it. There is no doubt, I think, that the Doisneau photograph pulls the viewer into a complicity with the man and his furtive look. But that does not necessarily mean the spectator sympathizes with that look. Indeed, many of my students often comment that the photograph shows the man (agreeing with Pollock, then, that the photograph is centred on the man) as a 'leech', a 'dirty old man', a 'voyeur'. That is, they see him as the point of the photograph, but that does not make the photograph an expression of a way of seeing that they approve of. Moreover, that man and his look might not be the only thing that a particular viewer sees in that photograph, as I'll suggest in a moment. Thus audiences make their own interpretations of an image.

Those theories that privilege the *technological* site at which an image's meanings are made similarly often imply that the technology used to make and display an image will control an audience's reaction. Again, this might be an important point to consider. How does seeing a particular movie on a television screen differ from seeing it on a large cinema screen with 3D glasses? How different is a reproduction in a book of an altarpiece from seeing the original in a church? Clearly at one level these are technological questions concerning the size, colour and texture, for example, of the image. At another level though they raise a number of other, more important questions about how an image is looked at differently in different contexts. You don't do the same things while you're flicking through a book of renaissance altarpieces as you do when you're in a church looking at one. While you're looking at a book you can be listening to music, eating, comparing one plate to another; in a church you may have to dress a certain way to get in, remain quiet, not get very close, not actually be able to see it at all well, let alone touch the image. Again, the audiencing of an image thus appears very important to its meanings and effects.

The *social* is thus perhaps the most important modality for understanding the audiencing of images. In part this is a question of the different

social practices which structure the viewing of particular images in particular places. Visual images are always practised in particular ways, and different practices are often associated with different kinds of images in different kinds of spaces. A cinema, a television in a living-room and a canvas in a modern art gallery do not invite the same ways of seeing. This is both because, let's say, a Hollywood movie, a tv soap and an abstract expressionist canvas do not have the same compositionality or depend on the same technologies, but also because they are not done in the same way. Popcorn is not sold by or taken into galleries, generally, and usually soaps are not watched in contemplative, reverential isolation. Different ways of relating to visual images define the cinema and the gallery, for example, as different kinds of spaces. You don't applaud a sculpture the way you might do a film, but applauding might depend on the sort of film and the sort of cinema you see it in. This point about the spaces and practices of display is especially important to bear in mind given the increasing mobility of images now; images appear and reappear in all sorts of places, and those places, with their particular ways of spectating, mediate the visual effects of those images.

Thus, to return to our example, you are looking at the Doisneau photograph in a particular way because it is reproduced in this book and is being used here as a pedagogic device; you're looking at it often (I hope – although this work on audiences suggests you may well not be bothering to do that) and looking at it in different ways depending on the issues I'm raising. You'd be doing this photograph very differently if you'd been sent it in the format of a postcard (and many of Doisneau's photographs have been reproduced as greetings cards, postcards and posters). Maybe you would merely have glanced at it before reading the message on its reverse far more avidly; if the card had been sent by a lover, maybe you'd see it as some sort of comment on your relationship . . . and so on.

There is actually very little discussion of these sorts of topics in the literature on visual culture; and most of the discussion that has taken place has explored the particular ways people watch television and videos in their homes. Chapter 8 will explore those studies. As we will see, they often rely on research methods that pay little attention to the images themselves and much more to the reactions and doings of their viewers. This is because many of those concerned with audiences argue that audiences are the most important aspect of an image's meaning. They thus tend, like those studies which privilege the social modality of the site of production of imagery, to use methods that don't address visual imagery directly.

The second and related aspect of the social modality of audiencing images concerns the social identities of those doing the watching. As Chapter 8 will discuss in more detail, there have been many studies which have explored how different audiences interpret the same visual images in very different ways, and these differences have been attributed to the different social identities of the viewers concerned.

In terms of the Doisneau photograph, it's seemed to me that as I've shown it to students over a number of years, their responses have changed in relation to some changes in ways of representing gender and sexuality in the wider visual culture of Britain from the late 1980s to the late 1990s. When I first showed it, students would often agree with Pollock's interpretation, although sometimes it would be suggested that the man looked rather henpecked and that this somehow justified his harmless fun. It would have been interesting to see if this opinion came significantly more often from male students than female, since the work cited above would assume that the gender of its audiences in particular would make a difference to how this photo was seen. More recently, though, another response has been made more often. And that is to wonder what the woman is looking at. For in a way, Pollock's argument replicates what she criticizes: the denial of vision to the woman. Instead, more and more of my students have started to speculate on what the woman in the photo is admiring. Women students now quite often suggest that of course what she is appreciating is a gorgeous semi-naked man, and sometimes they say, maybe it's a gorgeous woman. These responses depend on three things, I think. One is the increasing representation in the last few years of male bodies as objects of desire in advertising (especially, it seems to me, in perfume adverts); we are more used now to seeing men on display as well as women. Another development is what I would very cautiously describe as 'girlpower'; the apparently increasing ability of young women to say what they want, what they really really want. And a third development might be the recent fashionability in Britain of what has been called 'lesbian chic'. Now of course, it would take a serious study (using some of the methods I will explore in this book) to sustain any of these suggestions, but I offer them here, tentatively, as an example of how an image can be read differently by different audiences: in this case, by different genders and at different historical moments.

There are, then, two aspects of the social modality of audiencing: the social practices of spectating and the social identities of the spectators. Some work, however, has drawn these two aspects of audiencing together to argue that only certain sorts of people do certain sorts of images in particular ways. Sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel (1991), for example, have undertaken large-scale surveys of the visitors to art galleries, and have argued that the dominant way of visiting art galleries – walking around quietly from painting to painting, appreciating the particular qualities of each one, contemplating them in quiet awe – is a practice associated with middle-class visitors to galleries. As they say, 'museum visiting increases very strongly with increasing level of education, and is almost exclusively the domain of the cultivated classes' (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1991: 14). They are quite clear that this is not because those who are not middle class are incapable of appreciating art. Bourdieu and Darbel (1991: 39) say that, 'considered as symbolic goods, works of art only exist for those who have the means of appropriating them, that is, of deciphering

them'. To appreciate works of art you need to be able to understand, or to decipher, their style – otherwise they will mean little to you. And it is only the middle classes who have been educated to be competent in that deciphering. Thus they suggest, rather, that those who are not middle class are not taught to appreciate art; that although the curators of galleries and the 'cultivated classes' would deny it, they have learnt what to do in galleries and they are not sharing their lessons with anyone else. Art galleries therefore exclude certain groups of people. Indeed, in other work Bourdieu (1984) goes further and suggests that competence in such techniques of appreciation actually defines an individual as middle class. In order to be properly middle class, one must know how to appreciate art, and how to perform that appreciation appropriately (no popcorn please).

The Doisneau photograph is an interesting example here again. Many reproductions of his photographs were produced and could be bought in Britain from a chain of shops called Athena (which went out of business some time ago). Athena also sold posters of pop stars, cute animals, muscle-bound men holding babies, and so on. Students in my classes would be rather divided over whether buying such images from Athena was something they would do or not – whether it showed you had (a certain kind of) taste or not. I find Doisneau's photographs rather sentimental and tricky, rather stereotyped – and I rarely bought anything from Athena to stick on the walls of the rooms I lived in when I was a student. Instead, I preferred postcards of modernist paintings picked up on my summer trips to European art galleries. This was a genuine preference but I also know that I wanted the people who visited my room to see that I was . . . well, cultured. And students I now teach tell me that they often think about the images with which they decorate their rooms in the same manner – they certainly look at the posters and postcards stuck up on their friends' walls in the same way. Our use of images, our appreciation of certain kinds of imagery, performs a social function as well as an aesthetic one. It says something about who we are and how we want to be seen.

These issues surrounding the audiencing of images are often researched using methods that are quite common in qualitative social science research: interviews, ethnography, and so on. This will be explored in Chapter 8. However, as I have noted above, it is possible and necessary to consider the viewing practices of one spectator without using such techniques because that spectator is you. It is important to consider how you are looking at a particular image and to write – or perhaps express visually – that into your interpretation. Exactly what this call to reflexivity means is a question that will recur throughout this book.

5 choosing a method

The previous section tried to translate the general concerns of the critical visual methodology outlined in sections 3 and 4 into some more empirically

oriented areas of interest. This is an important step, because it allows subsequent chapters to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of particular methods on the basis of their ability to access those areas of interest. Each of the following chapters discusses one method for analysing visual images in some detail. The method will be summarized and explored through a case study, and then its strengths and weaknesses will be discussed.

Before choosing your method and commencing your analysis, however, you need to do two sorts of preparatory reading. First, all of these methods require some sorts of contextual knowledge about the imagery you are interested in. It is always important to know something about all aspects of the image you want to research; even if the audience is your main analytical focus, it is often useful to know something about the production of the image too. So before you utilize any of the methods which the following chapters discuss, look at the bibliographies at the end of the book to help you find some background material, and use the other resources at your disposal too: libraries, databases, reading lists and so on. Search for what others have written on the medium in which you're interested – say, photography, in the Doisneau case – and on the genres which you think are relevant to the images you're concerned with – in this case, street photography. If you have an 'artist' of some kind as the producer of your images, look for what has been written on him or her.

Having said that you need some broad contextual knowledge, however, it is crucial to note that there are very few studies of visual culture which attempt to examine all the areas outlined in the previous section, and those that do suffer (I think) from a certain analytical incoherence. As I hope is clear, engaging with the debates in visual culture means deciding which site and which modalities you think are most important in explaining the effect of an image. Moreover, none of the methods discussed in this book claim to address all those areas either. Figure 1.4 is an attempt to suggest how the various methods this book will discuss – compositional interpretation, content analysis, semiology, psychoanalysis, discourse analysis and audience studies – each have their own analytical assumptions and thus their own empirical focus.

Both theoretically and methodologically, then, any interpretation of images must focus on just some of the issues raised in the previous section. As I hope this chapter has made clear, there are many ways of understanding visual imagery and different theoretical standpoints have quite different methodological implications. This means that you need to address some of the theoretical issues raised in this chapter before plunging into the analysis of visual material, and this is the second sort of preparatory reading you need to do. If, having done that, you think that the audience is the most important site at which the meaning of an image is made, and that the social is that site's most important modality (these are theoretical choices), then there is no point doing huge amounts of research on the production processes or the technologies of the image you're concerned with. Theoretical decisions will enable you to focus your methodological strategies.

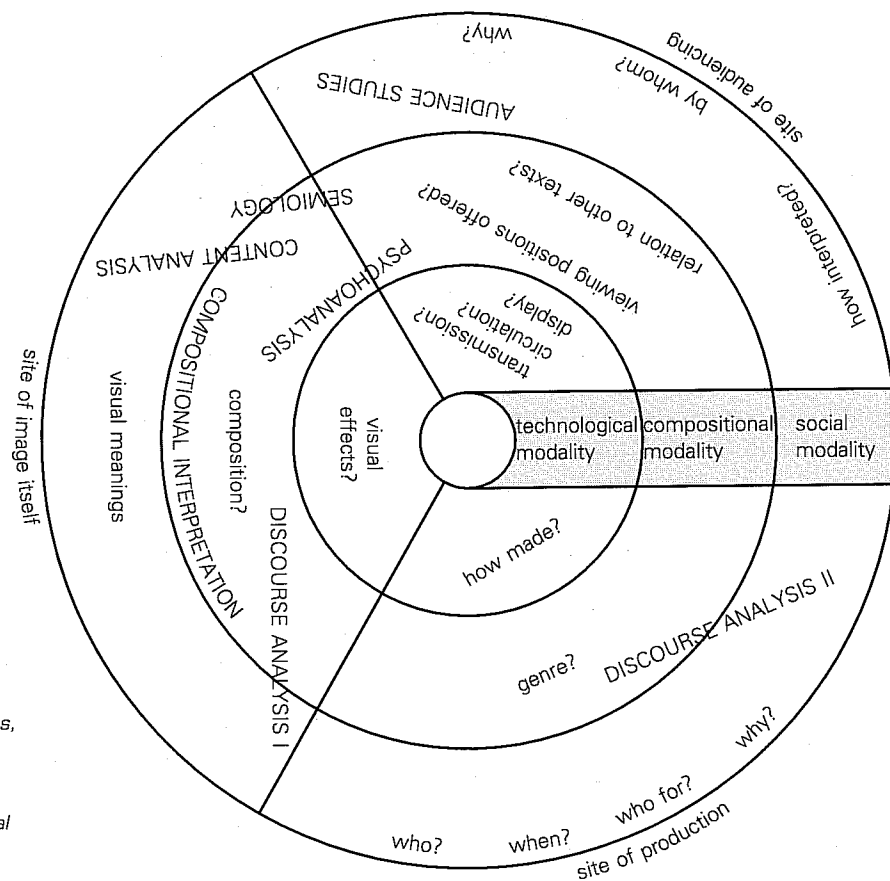


Figure 1.4 Sites, modalities and methods for interpreting visual materials

6 finding, referencing and reproducing your images

This book assumes that you have already found the images with which you want to research. If you haven't, the possible sources you might use are endless. There are contemporary exhibitions, galleries, magazines, cinemas, tv shows, videos and web pages; there are historical archives and museums. Lois Swan-Jones (1999) offers a useful guide to *Art Information on the Internet*, and there is also the *Picture Researcher's Handbook* (Evans and Evans, 1996; see also Eakins and Loving, 1985). The key texts listed in the bibliographies at the end of this book may also provide some ideas. If you find just one image that intrigues you, that's a good start. You can find more related images by searching for published work on the artist who made that first image, or on the genre to which it belongs. If it's an historical image, contact its owners, and make use of archivists; they are almost always extremely helpful and knowledgeable.

Once you have found your images, there are a number of considerations to bear in mind in relation to their eventual use in your essay or

dissertation. First, you need to be able to *reference* them in as clear a manner as you would reference any other source material. That is, you need to record as much of the following sort of information as possible. For a painting, for example, you'll need the name and date of the artist who made the image, the title of the piece, the date of its creation, the materials from which it is made, its dimensions, its condition, its current location and its accession number (if it is now in a collection). For an advertisement in a magazine, perhaps you'd need the name, date, volume number and place of publication of the magazine, plus the number of the page on which the advert appeared and its size; or, if you know about the whole campaign of which this advert is a part, you need to make systematic reference to the different parts of that campaign.

Second, you need to consider the precise *format* in which you will interpret your images. In particular, how much material beyond the image itself will you need? Surrounding text can make a big difference to a picture's interpretation. The Doisneau photograph, for example, has been given three different titles by the various books it has been reproduced in: 'A Sidelong Glance', 'Painting by Wagner in the window of the Galerie Romi, Rue de Seine, Paris 6e, 1948', 'An Oblique Look'. Each encourages a rather different interpretation. Other aspects of an image's format are important too. If you are studying a painting, is it important that you see the original, or is a reproduction good enough? Should you be concerned with its original site of display, or is seeing it in a gallery adequate? If it's an advertisement, how important is it to know what was printed next to it in a magazine? Some of these concerns depend, again, on what theoretical position you are adopting. Knowing where an advert appeared in a magazine would be more important if you were using discourse analysis (Chapter 6), for example, than if you were using compositional interpretation (Chapter 2) or content analysis (Chapter 3). However, they can be crucial regardless of your particular method. Cartoons, for example, are meaningless without their accompanying text.

Finally, it's always useful to bear in mind how you might *reproduce* the images you are researching. If you are writing something on visual images, it is important to show the reader what you are discussing. Don't crop or otherwise tamper with the reproduction without making your intervention clear to your reader (if you've cut an image down to show a small part of it, say it's a 'detail' of the work). In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger (1972) goes even further and offers essays consisting entirely of images; you might feel that some of the things you want to say about your images are better shown visually, as a photo-essay perhaps, or by annotating your images with text and other images as Berger also does (see Figure 1.2). Colour photocopying is an excellent way to reproduce published images for essays (even black and white photographs are better copied this way because the various shades of grey are much better preserved). You can also download images from the web. If these sorts of reproductions are for private research purposes only, there is usually no

problem with copyright. However, if you think you might publish your work, then you will often be legally obliged to obtain permission from the copyright holders to reproduce it; Rosemary Eakins and Elizabeth Loving (1985: 8–15) have a guide to pictures and the law. Reproduction for publication often entails paying a fee to the copyright holders too, and you will need your sources clearly recorded to do this.

7 summary

- visual imagery is never innocent; it is always constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledges.
- a critical approach to visual images is therefore needed: one that thinks about the agency of the image, considers the social practices and effects of its viewing, and reflects on the specificity of that viewing by various audiences including the academic critic.
- the meanings of an image or set of images are made at three sites: the sites of production, the image itself, and its audiencing.
- there are three modalities to each of these sites: technological, compositional, and social.
- theoretical debates about how to interpret images can be understood as debates over which of these sites and modalities is most important for understanding an image.
- these debates affect the methodology that is most appropriately brought to bear on particular images.
- consider your requirements for reproducing images as you choose which ones to discuss.

further reading

Stuart Hall in his essay 'The work of representation' (1997b) offers a very clear discussion of recent debates about culture, representation and power. A useful collection of some of the key texts that have contributed towards the field of visual culture has been put together by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall as *Visual Culture: The Reader* (1999). Hal Foster's collection *Vision and Visuality* (1988b) contains essays by some leading theorists that nicely summarise their positions.

2

'The good eye'

looking at pictures using compositional interpretation

1 an introduction to compositional interpretation

The first criterion for a critical approach to visual imagery that the previous chapter outlined (in section 3) was the need to take images seriously. That is, it is crucial to look very carefully at the image or images in which you are interested, because the image itself has its own effects. These effects are always embedded in social practices, of course, and may well be negotiated by the image's audiences; nevertheless, it seems to me that there is no point in researching any aspect of the visual unless the power of the visual is acknowledged. As Norman Bryson (1991: 71) says of paintings, 'the power of the painting is there, in the thousands of gazes caught by its surface, and the resultant turning, and the shifting, the redirecting of the discursive flow'. Paintings, like other visual images, catch the gazes of spectators and affect them in some way, and they do so through how they look.

But how can you describe how an image looks? This chapter explores one approach which offers a detailed vocabulary for expressing the appearance of an image. I have chosen to call this approach 'compositional interpretation'. This is a term I have invented for describing an approach to imagery which has developed through certain kinds of art history. I need to invent a term because the method has tended to be conveyed by example rather than by explication (some exceptions to this generalization include Acton, 1997; Gilbert, 1995; O'Toole, 1994; Taylor, 1957). This method depends on what Irit Rogoff (1998: 17) calls 'the good eye'; that is, a way of looking at paintings that is not methodologically explicit but which nevertheless produces a specific way of describing paintings. The 'good eye' pays attention to what it sees as high Art, and refuses to be either methodologically or theoretically explicit. It thus functions as a kind of visual connoisseurship.