Semiotics and Iconography

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses two approaches to visual analysis: the visual semiotics of Roland Barthes (1973, 1977) and iconography. These two approaches ask the same two fundamental questions: the question of representation (what do images represent and how?) and the question of the 'hidden meanings' of images (what ideas and values do the people, places and things represented in images stand for?). With respect to the images in Figure 5.1, taken from a Dutch junior high-school geography textbook (Bols et al., 1986), these questions would become: (1) Who and what are the (kinds of) people, places and things depicted in these two images, and how do we recognize them as such?; and (2) what ideas and values do we associate with these depicted people, places and things, and what is it that allows us to do so? But where Barthian visual semiotics studies only the image itself, and treats cultural meanings as a given currency which is shared by everyone who is at all acculturated to contemporary popular culture, and which can then be activated by the style and content of the image, iconography also pays attention to the context in which the image is produced and circulated, and to how and why cultural meanings and their visual expressions come about historically.

The formulation 'people, places and things' indicates that Barthian visual semiotics and iconography deal, by and large, with the individual bits and pieces within images; in other words, they concentrate on what, in the case of language, we would call 'lexis' or vocabulary. The social semiotic approach described in Chapter 7 has relatively little to say about 'visual lexis' and hence one or both of the approaches described here would form a very useful complement to it. On the other hand, Barthian semiotics and iconography do not have very much to say about visual 'syntax'. Although they do not stop at inventories of the meanings of the individual people, places and things in images and also put them together to show how they add up to a coherent whole, they do not usually identify specific patterns for this or use specific methods to put the meanings together. (Iconography sometimes does, but generally within the confines of a specific style, school or period.) Again, this suggests possibilities for combining social semiotics and the approaches described here. The formulation 'people, places and things' might also seem to exclude 'abstract things'. While it is true that Barthes has concentrated on figurative images, more specifically photographic images (see Groupe μ, 1992 for a structuralist approach to abstraction), and that iconography
shows how it can handle large quantities of data, typically in relation to confirming comparative hypotheses ('expectations'), such as that women are more often represented as engaged in domestic activities than men, or that professionals in the movies or television series of a given period are more often played by white rather than black actors. But, as Bell points out in the chapter, it can equally well be applied to formal issues (for example, whether yellow is more often used on magazine covers than green), or, indeed, to any issue that allows the formulation of clearly definable categories and comparative hypotheses. The chapter provides enough detail to allow readers to construct their own content analyses, including the necessary statistics.

Visual anthropology (Chapter 3) is concerned with the use of visual records for the description of the present and past ways of life of specific communities. In the case of past ways of life, visuals are often (very successfully) used to elicit memories from informants. In this chapter, Malcolm Collier draws on a wide range of examples, including studies of Anglo immigration in New Mexico agricultural communities, student behaviour in Cantonese bilingual classes in San Francisco, and community schools in Alaska and the Navajo Nation in Arizona. It is very much oriented towards the practice of visual research, discussing what kinds of photographic and video records are most useful for the purposes of anthropological research, and what kinds of contextual information to keep. The chapter ends with a challenging call for the development of a visual language for intellectual discourse.

Cultural Studies (Chapter 4) has recently developed a specific sub-field of visual cultural studies, which, as Martin Lister and Liz Wells describe, is premised on the unprecedented importance of imaging and visual technologies in contemporary society, and concerned with all kinds of visual information, its meanings, pleasures and consumption, including the study of all visual technologies, from oil painting to the Internet. The chapter sees Cultural Studies as an interdisciplinary field, and describes it, not as a specific methodology, but as an agenda of questions and issues for addressing specific images. These questions and issues are then matched to the conceptual frameworks and methodologies of a range of different disciplines. This approach makes the chapter particularly useful as a model for integrating the various approaches discussed in this volume as a whole. The chapter draws primarily on examples of mass media and art photographic images, from global cigarette advertising campaigns to documentary photographs of famines in Africa—the latter, as Lister and Wells point out, having played a key role in constructing a Eurocentric view of Africa and its peoples as 'economically and technologically weak, dependent victims of natural disaster' (p. 78).

The chapter on semiotics and iconography (Chapter 5) written by Theo van Leeuwen discusses the visual semiotics of Roland Barthes and the iconographical method of visual analysis developed by art historians such as Edgar Wind, Erwin Panofsky and Meyer Schapiro. Both methods are premised on the idea of layered meaning, of images consisting first of all of a layer of representational or denotative meaning (the layer of who and what are depicted here) on which is then superimposed a layer of connotative or symbolic meaning (the layer of what does it...
all mean). Both methods provide specific pointers for distinguishing and analysing these layers, and specific criteria for arguing whether or not a layer of symbolic or second-order meaning is present. The main difference between the two is that iconography uses both textual and contextual criteria for arguing symbolic meaning, while Paris school semiotics restricts itself mostly to textual criteria, to pointers within the image itself. Although iconography has mainly been applied to art works from the past, the chapter attempts to demonstrate that it can also be applied to contemporary images, using Ian Nederveen Pieterse's (1992) history of the European and North American depiction of Africans and Afro-Americans as a main source of examples.

The chapter on psychoanalytical image analysis (Chapter 6), written by Gertraud Diem-Wille, a Viennese psychoanalyst specializing in the treatment of children, argues that children, within the special context of the psychoanalytic session, produce drawings that are based on the same primary processes of representation as dreams. Their meanings can therefore be brought out through psychoanalysis, just like those of dreams. Diem-Wille then goes on to apply this method to what could be called a socio-psychoanalytical study of what drives highly successful career men and women. Here the projective drawing technique is seen to lower interviewees' defences, enabling them to visually express what they are inhibited from verbally expressing. Although Diem-Wille is reluctant to generalize, the cases she discusses reveal patterns which have wider validity in understanding the influence of parental relationships on career choices, and paths, and the role of work in the formation of identity.

Social semiotic visual analysis (Chapter 7) provides a detailed and explicit method for analysing the meanings established by the syntactic relations between the people, places and things depicted in images. These meanings are described as not only representational, but also interactional (images do things to or for the viewer), concerned with the modality or perceived truth value of images, and compositional (for example, positioning images and written text in certain ways). In this chapter Carey Jewitt and Rumiko Oyama characterize social semiotics as concerned with the study of images in their social context, and as a critical form of visual discourse analysis which does not necessarily stop at description but may also seek to influence the semiotic practices it describes. The chapter shows the method at work in three different research projects: the study of sexual health materials already mentioned, an ethnographic/semiotic study of the primary school science classroom and a study of some of the cross-cultural differences in visual syntax which distinguish British and Japanese exit signs and magazine advertisements.

In the case of conversation analysis and ethnomethodology (Chapter 8), visual analysis is not so much a matter of analysing images (with or without consideration of their context) as of analysing the dynamic unfolding of specific social practices in which non-verbal communication (pointing, gaze work, and so on) and images (including signs, maps and diagrams) play a role. The chapter begins by showing how, without taking account of visual communication, conversation analysis might not only miss out on information but lead to inaccurate conclusions. Charles Goodwin discusses the role of a range of different kinds of
image in the work of scientists and other experts. Both the production of images (for example, map-making by archaeologists) and their interpretation (for example, the interpretation of the Rodney King videotape by police experts during the infamous trials) take place in situated interactions that use a variety of communication modes – speech, non-verbal communication (for example, pointing and gaze work) and images (for example, the archaeologists’ map or the Rodney King video). The same images, moreover, may be used differently by different participants (for example, a schedule of plane arrivals and departures is used differently by baggage handlers and gate agents). The chapter provides specific pointers for analysing existing images (and for producing useful video recordings for research purposes), and argues powerfully for studying visual communication in its socially specific and multimodal contexts.

The chapter on film and television analysis (Chapter 9) discusses a television documentary which depicts the conflicts between the clinical and administrative sections of a large hospital, and demonstrates how this film is systematically constructed to favour one point of view over others, and how a study of this kind of bias might be conducted. Combining elements from film theory and social semiotic genre analysis, Rick Iedema describes the different levels at which film and television texts can be studied (the frame, the shot, the scene, the sequence, the stage and the genre), and then looks at key variables and methods relevant to each of these levels. At the time of writing the chapter, the author was working as a research consultant for a large hospital, and hence the chapter is an example of applied visual analysis, of a form of critical analytical practice taking place inside an institution, with the aim to influence and change the practices of that institution.

THE IMAGE AS RECORD AND AS CONSTRUCT

Some of the chapters in this volume describe the analysis of images specially produced for research purposes (Chapters 3 and, in part, 8). Such images are produced to serve as records of reality, as documentary evidence of the people, places, things, actions and events they depict. Their analysis is a matter of extracting just that kind of information from them. The same applies to the therapeutic use of drawings described in Chapter 6. The analysis of these drawings must bring out, for instance, what the family relations in a given subject’s childhood were like and how they were experienced by the subject. Art historians, too (Chapter 5), often analyse images as sources of factual information, even though, in this case, the images may not have been specially produced for this purpose. Researchers who use images in this way are of course aware of the limitations of images (including photographic and video images) as sources of factual information. Good research images, as Collier describes them (Chapter 3), should not be overly constructed, or complex, and therefore harder to read than images produced for the media or as art images; also they should not be isolated from the series of images to which they belong (for as he points out, single images and images without extensive contextual annotation are problematic for research purposes). However, despite their limitations, images are, in this context,
regarded as a reliable source of factual evidence, and Collier in fact prefers them over the 'deceptive world of words' (p. 59).

In other cases images are analysed, not as evidence of the who, where and what of reality, but as evidence of how their maker or makers have (re-)constructed reality, as evidence of bias, ideologically coloured interpretation, and so on. This is common in Cultural Studies and semiotic analyses (for example, Chapters 4, 5, 7 and 9), and in ethnomethodological research when the process of (re-)constructing reality itself is documented, such as in studies on the way scientists change the apparently unruly and messy world of photographs into the more orderly world of diagrams by 'filtering', 'uniforming', 'upgrading' and 'defining' photographs (Lynch, quoted in Chapter 8: 163). From these perspectives the image is more unreliable and slippery as a source of factual information. In this volume Lister and Wells, like Sekula whom they quote, mistrust the 'evidence' of photojournalism and documentary photography: '... when photographs are uncritically presented as historical documents, they are transformed into aesthetic objects. Accordingly, the pretence to historical understanding remains although that understanding has been replaced by aesthetic experience' (Sekula in Chapter 4: 89).

The point for us is not to construct theoretical arguments in favour of reality or construction, or to arbitrate in the debates on this issue from our editorial position. Rather we think the point is to urge you to keep the distinction in mind when reading the chapters in this volume, and to consider that the choice of an appropriate method of analysis is dependent on the nature of the project in which it is to be used, on the visual material that is being investigated, and on the goals of the research project. Indeed, sometimes several methods may be necessary. One of us is currently engaged in a research project dealing with children's toys. The project investigates both the meanings offered to the child by the toy industry and the mass media (through the texts and pictures on toy packaging, in toy catalogues, in toy advertisements, and so on) and the way in which these (and other) meanings are taken up in parent–child interactions and in the child's actual playing with the toys. Clearly the former requires a mode of analysis in which the various packaging texts, catalogues and advertisements are treated as constructs, and the latter the analysis of videotapes specially produced for the research as ethnographic evidence of parent–child interaction and children's play with toys.

The issue of 'record' versus 'construct' exists because many images have an element of both and so require a mode of analysis which is sensitive to both. Clearly advertising images are in the first place constructs and their analysis must reveal the nature of these constructs. Equally clearly construction has to be minimal (or, where images are specially produced for research purposes, minimized) if images are to be used as records of people, places, things, actions or events. Again, it is no accident that studies aiming at changing practices of representation often choose a detailed and explicit method of analysing construction and its effects, so as to avoid the idea that it is all in the eye of the beholder, which in this case would be counterproductive (cf. Chapters 2, 7 and 9); alternatively they could of course document the very processes of that construction, as happens in ethnomethodological research (Chapter 8).
THE UNITS OF ANALYSIS: SINGLE IMAGES VERSUS COLLECTIONS OF IMAGES

Some of the approaches to visual analysis described in this volume are based on the analysis of collections of images, others on the analysis of single images. Chapter 2 shows that content analysis requires at least two different sets of data (for example, images from two different periods or publications) for the purpose of comparison, and that each of these sets needs to contain a sufficiently large number of similar images (for example, all advertisements containing images of women from a given period of time) in order to be both representative and statistically significant. Visual anthropology (Chapter 3) also uses collections of images, but for different purposes. Collier describes two kinds of collections: first, collections of many different images of the same subject (for example, wide views, details and a range of angles of the same street) which are put together to allow patterns to become visible; and second, collections of images made to help identify what is depicted in a given image (for example, a 60-year-old image of an elderly man engaged in wheat harvesting was compared to other photos of the same man in different settings, other photos of the area and other photos of wheat harvesting, in order to establish exactly who the man was, where he was photographed and what he was doing). As discussed in Chapter 5, art historians also use this method when they want to establish the exact who, where and what of art works of the past. As noted by Collier and Goodwin in Chapters 3 and 8, films and videos are always collections of images.

In other cases single images are discussed. But, as indicated in Chapters 2, 5 and 7, any method of visual analysis which provides a wide enough range of clearly defined specific image features and connects them convincingly enough with particular meanings and/or communicative effects can be used either for the analysis of single images or quantitatively.

TEXT, CONTEXT, SOCIAL PRACTICE

There is another way in which the various approaches described in this volume do not use the same units of analysis. Visual analysis may be based only on what is visible within the image or collection of images (in the text), as is the case, by and large, with content analysis (Chapter 2) and also with various types of semiotic analysis (Chapters 5, 7 and 9). It may draw on contextual information, whether gleaned from interviews, as in the case of visual anthropology (Chapter 3) and the therapeutic interview (Chapter 6), or from archival research and background reading, as in the case of iconography (Chapter 5). Or, as in the case of Cultural Studies (Chapter 4), it may use a range of different kinds of information. The approach of Chapter 8 is different again. Here the unit of analysis is not the text, or the text together with external, contextual information, but the enacted social practices in which images are used.

The same applies to the question of word and image. Images may be analysed without any recourse to the verbal or written information which may accompany
them (for example, the catalogue of an exhibition or the introduction to a book of artistic photographs). The images may have been designed to be self-sufficient, or capable of being inserted into many different contexts, as certainly is the case with much contemporary fine art and 'classic' photojournalism (such as Cartier-Bresson in Chapter 4). At the very least there is as much of a case here for analysing the broader, supra-contextual meaning potential of images, as for analysing their meanings in a particular context, for example a particular exhibition. But visual analysis may also include the accompanying text, or even see word and image as one indivisible unit of analysis, as in the social semiotic analysis of layout (Chapter 7). In such an approach the catalogues, text panels, and so on of an exhibition would be included in the analysis, as a secondary source of information, serving, for instance, to anchor who or what is depicted or what is symbolized. But the analysis would still not include the way this meaning potential is actually taken up in the interactions of specific social actors visiting the exhibition, as would be the case in an ethnomethodological approach. Again, the choice of method depends on the nature of the material analysed and on the goals of the analysis. There are good arguments for analysing images in relative independence of their context (for re-contextualizing them, in other words), and for analysing them together with the physical context and or social interaction in which they are embedded (as, for instance, in the analysis of reading advertisements on hoardings or in magazines in Chapter 4).

TEXT, PRODUCER, VIEWER

These different perspectives on text, context and social practices have implications for the way in which the producers and viewers of images may be included or implied in the analysis. A mode of analysis which restricts itself to the evidence of the text may not, as Bell puts it, "by itself demonstrate how viewers understand and value what they see or hear" (Chapter 2: 26), or what producers, deliberately or otherwise, intend to communicate. On the other hand, text analysis can show what representations include and exclude, what they prioritize and make salient, and what differences they construct between different people, places and things.

The degree to which producers and viewers should be included and how this is to be achieved again depends on the kinds of images analysed, and on the aims of the research. Research aimed at discovering how a general audience understands advertising images should perhaps not include information about the production of advertisements which such an audience would not be familiar with. On the other hand, if a researcher wanted to change the audience's perceptions, for instance through media education, a 'look behind the scenes' might become relevant. Again, research aiming at critiquing, say, racism or sexism in certain representational practices clearly has an interest in linking these practices to specific social institutions, but in the analysis of art images (Chapters 4 and 5) producers may be depicted, not in terms of the formal or informal institutions within which their work is (or was) situated, but as individuals working on the basis of traditions, influences and inspirations – and here the audience will be less often taken into account. Important
and innovative research often thrives in the 'blind spots' of specific research approaches and methods, applying the methods of one approach to the kind of material studied in another—for instance, considering the individual in an area where most research has concentrated on institutions, or institutions in an area where most research has concentrated on individuals.

When social practices are taken as the units of analysis (as in Chapter 8), the difference between producers and consumers is much diminished. Both the archaeologist showing an apprentice how to construct an archaeological map and the police expert showing a jury how to interpret the Rodney King video use the resources of their expert knowledge to construct meaning. This method could also be used to show how the script of a television series is produced, or how university students learn new interpretations of a television series in Media Studies courses—all aspects of visual communication which could never be revealed, for instance, through content analysis. At the same time, this approach would not bring out what aspects of social life television series more generally include and exclude, what kind of interpretations are generally favoured in the mass media, and so on—questions which content analysis and semiotics are well placed to answer.

**CONCLUSION**

Clearly some methods of analysis are more methodical than others. Some lay down very precise criteria for analysis, so that the impression may arise that visual analysis can be done 'by rote', and described as a kind of recipe, a procedure to be followed step by step, without the need for any form of initiative, let alone inspiration. Content analysis, with its more or less mechanical statistical processing of data, and social semiotic analysis, with its proliferation of features and precise criteria for analysing them, tend most clearly in this direction. Anyone who has actually tried these methods knows that there is a great deal more room for initiative and, indeed, inspiration than is sometimes acknowledged in the way these methods are described. These methods remain an art of interpretation, but one that follows certain rules of accountability.

Other forms of analysis provide less precise rules for conducting the analysis. Cultural Studies and ethnomet hodology, for instance, certainly depart from precise theoretical positions, research questions and principles of research, but they do not provide a large number of analytical categories and nor do they explicitly construct research work in terms of a 'step-by-step procedure'. The approach described by Collier in Chapter 3 provides an intermediary position. Collier sees visual analysis as a complex process which alternates between stages that require an intuitive grasp of the whole and stages that require the hard work of structured analysis, of careful and methodical checking and double-checking. For Collier, it is both necessary to 'observe the data as whole', to look at, listen to 'its overtones and subtleties', to 'trust your feelings and impressions' and to 'go through the evidence with specific questions—measure distance, count, compare. Produce detailed descriptions' (Chapter 3: 39). He sees visual analysis as both art and science: 'It is both necessary and legitimate to allow ourselves to respond artistically or intuitively to visual images... However,
while creative processes are essential to discovery, artistic processes may produce only fictitious statements if not combined with systematic and detailed analysis' (p. 59). In our opinion, this can be usefully applied to all visual analysis.

REFERENCES

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