Visual Methodologies

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Visual culture is in a state of expansion, thus creating a need to establish and enhance theoretical methodologies and tools for the analysis of visual culture. Gillian Rose has written a well-structured book on different methods of interpreting visual images and materials. She presents a constructive analysis of the many theoretical frameworks in visual culture intertwined with relevant methodologies that provide some detail on how, why, and when one can use visual technologies to support one’s research or be part of one’s research. Her position concerns itself with cultural meaning and power, where she is interested in the ways social subjectivities and relations are pictured in visual images, and how those processes are embedded in power relations. Thus her book is concerned with methodologies used in the analyses of how images visualize social difference, how images are looked at, and with ways of seeing.

The book begins with a discussion of critical debates related to visual culture and provides a detailed explanation of what she means by critical visual methodology. Through this introduction of visual culture, Rose establishes that interpretations of visual images exhibit three sites at which meanings of an image are made: the site of production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site of audience. Each of these sites has three different aspects to them; the compositionality, the technological, and the social modality of the image.

Each different methodology used in interpreting visual images is explained. The strengths and weaknesses of each method are discussed in relation to a detailed case study that is both theoretical and practical in context. The methods discussed include compositional interpretation, content analysis, semiology, psychoanalysis, discourse analysis, audience analysis, anthropological analysis, and methods of using photographs and videos as part of one’s research project. By using case studies, most of the chapters focus on a particular visual method of interpretation with reference to one form of visual imagery such as paintings, films, television, magazines, advertisements, and photographs.

Rose’s long-standing interest in feminist film theory and feminist accounts of visual research has made her discussion on the methodology of psychoanalysis
and its related case studies very thought-provoking. Her analysis of Laura Mulvey’s study in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* is useful for students who want to analyze films or know more on feminist theories and methodologies. Rose discusses the two psychoanalytic concepts, the castration complex and the mirror stage, in great detail, outlining the feminist concept that visuality is structured by gender, where the pleasure in looking has been split between an active male and a passive female, producing woman as the image, the object, and the man as the bearer of the look. Rose’s chapter on content analysis is the most quantitative of the chapters in subject matter and vocabulary; here she discusses the methodology in terms of Catherine Lutz’s and Jane Collins’s case study of *National Geographic* magazine [reviewed in *Visual Anthropology*, 7(3): 261–269].

The most abstract chapters of Rose’s book are those on semiology and discourse analysis, where she uses highly technical language that often leads to one having to do some extra reading on the subject matter. However, she does provide some challenging ideas, and her discourse analysis of the art gallery offers a methodology that allows detailed consideration of how the effects of dominant power relations work through institutional practices and effect visual images. The book also presents some questions of reflexivity in each chapter, especially in the chapters related to the site of audiencing, where Rose discusses the methodologies of audience research, anthropological analysis, and methods of using photographs and videos as part of a research project.

The book gives the reader some practical assistance on how to interpret visuals while also allowing the reader to gain an understanding of the theoretical debates surrounding the different methodologies. However, Rose does not provide enough detail on the contents of using visual technologies such as video and photography to support research findings of a research project or to become the focus of the research. The book also does not provide a great amount of emphasis on the ethics of researching visual materials in today’s visual culture, or using photographs and video in one’s research. Furthermore, the vocabulary Rose uses is both challenging and technical. For example, her chapters on psychoanalysis, semiology, and discourse analysis are complex and technical, but also thought-provoking, making the reader follow up on extra readings. The vocabulary of the book even changes to the specifics of each methodology, thus creating a rutted and compacted read.

Although the book is very good in explaining the theoretical concepts of many different methodologies used in the interpretation of the visual, it lacks in providing a more practical side to explain how to obtain data from visual materials and interpret visual materials for research purposes. What Rose could have included in each chapter and case study of a methodology is a step-by-step illustration of the research process from the project design implementation to analyzing and interpreting the data obtained from the visual images. In comparison to other books that deal with methods of interpreting visual images and materials and the dynamics of visual culture and visual anthropology in social research, *Visual Methodologies* provides a thorough account of all the methodologies one might use in the interpretation of visual images in detail. But it does not
necessarily help the book’s intended target audience of undergraduate students to understand how to use the methodologies to obtain and interpret data from visuals for research purposes.

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