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TOWARDS A CRITICAL VISUAL METHODOLOGY

As should be evident from the previous chapter, the theoretical sources that have produced the recent interest in visual culture and visual research methods are philosophically, theoretically and conceptually diverse. This chapter will try to acknowledge some of that diversity, while also developing a framework for exploring the almost equally diverse range of methods that scholars working with visual materials can use. The framework developed is based on thinking about visual materials in terms of three sites: the site of *production*, which is where an image is made; the site of the *image* itself, which is its visual content; and the site where the image encounters its spectators or users, or what this book will call its *audiencing*. This chapter examines those sites in some depth, and explains how they can be used to make sense of theories of visual culture and of the methods used to engage with it. It has five sections:

- 1 the first discusses these three sites in more detail;
- 2 the second looks at ways of understanding the site of the production of visual materials;
- 3 the third looks at approaches to the visual materials themselves;
- 4 the fourth examines the sites where visual materials are audienced;
- 5 and the fifth summarises the chapter.

2.1 The Three Sites of Production, the Image Itself and its Audiencing

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**. I also want to suggest that each of these sites has three different aspects. These different aspects I will call **modalities**, and I suggest that there are three of these that can contribute to a critical understanding of images:

production
image
audiences
modalities

- technological** • **technological.** Mirzoeff (1999: 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’. A visual technology can thus be relevant to how an image is made but also to how it travels and how it is displayed.
- compositional** • **compositional.** Compositionality refers to the specific material qualities of an image or visual object. When an image is made, it draws on a number of formal strategies: content, colour and spatial organisation, 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 4 will elaborate the notion of composition in relation to paintings.
- social** • **social.** This is very much a shorthand term. What I mean it to refer to is the range of economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image and through which it is seen and used.

Figure 2.1 is one way of visualising the intersections of sites and modalities. (The fact that all three modalities are found at all three sites, though, does suggest that the distinctions between sites are less clear than my sections and diagram here might imply.)

Many of the theoretical disagreements about visual culture, visualities and visual objects can be understood as disputes over which of these sites and modalities are most important, how and why. The following sections will explore each site and its modalities further, and will examine some of these disagreements in a little detail. To focus the discussion, and to give you a chance to explore how these sites and modalities intersect, I will often refer to the photograph reproduced in Figure 2.2. Take a good look at it now and note down your immediate reactions. Then see how your views of it alter as the following sections discuss its sites and modalities.

2.2 The Site of 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, like Friedrich Kittler (1999), for example, would argue that the *technologies* used in the *making* of an image determine its form, meaning and effect. In the case of the photograph in Figure 2.2, 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 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 that would

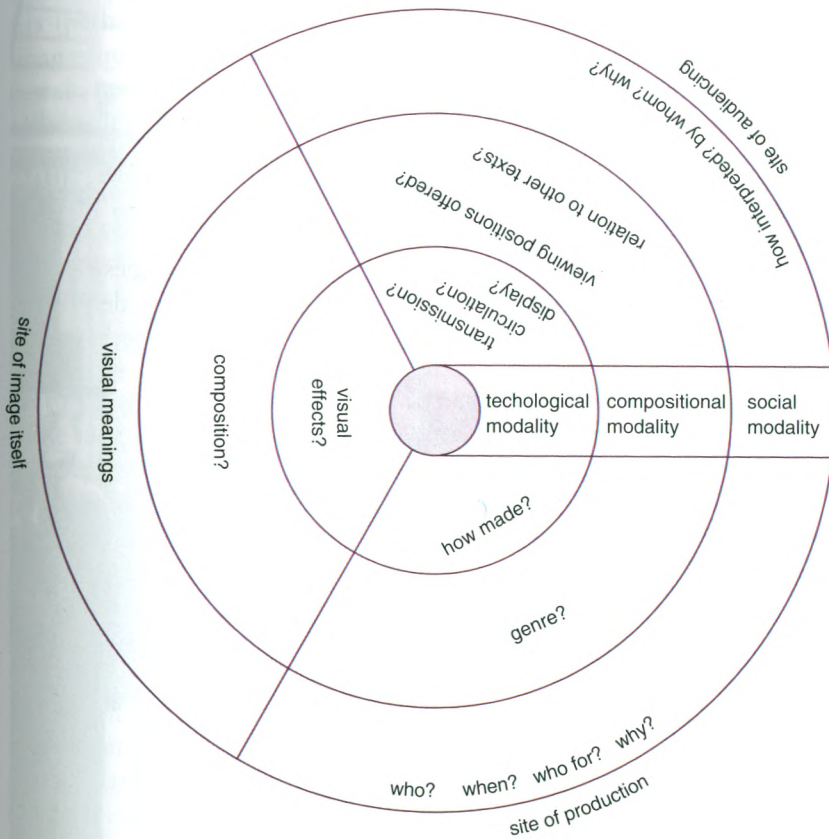


Figure 2.1
the sites and
modalities for
interpreting
visual
materials

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.

Another aspect of this photograph, and of analogue photographs more generally, is also often attributed to its technology: its apparent truthfulness. Here, though, it must be noted that critical opinion is divided. Some critics (for example Roland Barthes, whose arguments are discussed in Chapter 6) suggest that photographic technology does indeed capture what was really there when the shutter snapped. Others find the notion that ‘the camera never lies’ harder to accept. 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 has suggested to some critics that claims of ‘truthful’ photographic representation have been constructed. Chapter 9 here will look at some Foucauldian histories of photography which make this case with some vigour. Maybe we see this



Figure 2.2
 Photograph by
 Robert
 Doisneau/
 Rapho Gamma,
 Camera Press
 London

photograph as a snapshot of real life, then, more because we expect photos to show us snippets of truth than because they actually do. 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. Nonetheless, it is often very useful to understand the technologies used in the making of particular images, and at the end of the book you will find some references that will help you do that.

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 a particular image fits (perhaps rather uneasily) into. 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 ways of showing them. Thus, the home page of the website selling Doisneau prints, shown in Figure 2.3, has an arrangement of images and text that is very typical of many website homepages now. At the top of the page there are, among other things, a number of links to other parts of the site, including the Login and View Cart links so common to commercial sites, and a Search box. There also some animated images, again a very common strategy on many websites to make the site visually interesting, and a number of still images/texts that you can click on to lead you to other parts of the site. Finally, at the bottom, there are some more 'practical' links via words, to the 'Contact us' page and the 'Moneyback guarantee' page (other commercial sites often have their terms and conditions down here); and finally there is the copyright line that tells you who owns the copyright of the site, as well as a link to the agency who designed it. 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, so you may need to refer to other images of the same genre in order to explicate aspects of the one you are interested in. Many images play with more than one genre, of course, and a useful term here in relation to new media is **remediation**, coined by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) to describe the way in which digital technologies were drawing on the generic conventions of other media but were also creating their own genres too. Many books on visual images focus on one particular genre, and some are listed in the bibliographies at the end of this book.

genre

remediation

But what sort of genre does the photograph in Figure 2.2 fit into? Well, it fits 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 the photo fits most obviously into, 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 marginalised 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* or *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 that 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 organising itself in ways that are indeed compressing time and collapsing space. He argues that capitalism is more and more 'flexible' in its organisation 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 emphasise 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 that produce visual images and the political as well as the economic context in which they work. 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 mobilised in its making. Peter Hamilton's (1997) discussion of the sort of photography of which Figure 2.2 is a part explores its dependence on certain postwar ideas about the French working class. 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 rich 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 1.1). 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 visuality 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 kind of masculinity.

auteur theory

Finally, it should be noted that there is one element active at the site of production that many social scientists interested in the visual would pay very little attention to: 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**. 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 section 4.3.6). First, as we have seen, there are those who argue that other modalities of an image's production account for its effects. Secondly, 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 thirdly, 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.

2.3 The Site of 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 2009 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 the previous chapter noted, many writers on visual culture argue that an image may have its own effects that 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, however, 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 organisation 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, 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 organisation 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 effect on its viewers. It is necessary to pause here, however, and note that there is a significant debate among critics of visual culture about how to theorise an image's effects. As I have already noted, some critics are concerned that many discussions of visual culture do not pay enough attention to the specificities of particular images, and as a result end up reducing them to reflections of their cultural context. Pollock (1988: 25–30) herself has argued against such a strategy, and indeed her interpretation of the Doisneau photograph depends absolutely on paying very close attention to its visual and spatial structure and effects. However, hers is only one way to approach the question of an image's effects, and other critics advocate other ways.

Emerging from some critical quarters, for example, is a certain hesitation about full-on criticism of images' complicity with dominant ways of seeing class, race, gender, sexuality and so on. Mitchell (1996: 74), for

example, has called this sort of work 'both easy and ineffectual' because it changes nothing of what it criticises. Michael Ann Holly (in Cheetham et al. 2005: 88) has also worried that the urge to study visual culture simply in order to critique it seems 'to have sacrificed a sense of awe at the power of an overwhelming visual experience, wherever it might be found, in favour of the "political" connections that lie beneath the surface of this or that representation'. 'To me', Holly continues, 'that's neither good "research" nor serious understanding.' Holly even suggests that the theoretical rigour with which so many visual culture studies are conducted may also have a deadening effect on images. 'There are many times', she says, 'when I yearn for something that is "in excess of research"' (Holly in Cheetham et al. 2005: 88).

What is this 'in excess of research' for which Holly yearns? There are a number of approaches to visual images which emphasise the importance of the sensory experiencing of images. The art historians Caroline Van Eck and Edward Winters (2005), for example, argue that the essence of a visual experience is its sensory qualities, qualities studiously ignored by Pollock, in her essay on Doisneau at least. Van Eck and Winters (2005: 4), like many art historians, emphasise that 'there is a subjective "feel" that is ineliminable in our seeing something', and that appreciation of this 'feel' should be as much part of understanding images as the interpretation of their meaning, even though they find it impossible to convey fully in words (see also Elkins 1998; Mitchell 2005a). For Van Eck and Winters (2005), this sensory and experiential nature of seeing creates an excess beyond the cultural (see also Mitchell 1996). And of course there are the theoretical threads twisting their way through studies of visual culture that are concerned with the nonrepresentational, as Chapter 1 pointed out. Scholars such as Laura Marks and Mark Hansen emphasise the embodied and the experiential as what lies in excess of representation; hence their insistence on the power of the image itself and for the need to intensify the experiencing of images. In terms of affect, Richard Rushton (2009) emphasises the implications of Deleuze's arguments about the power of cinematic images in particular:

Deleuze throws down a quite extraordinary and risky challenge: that we lose control of ourselves, undo ourselves, forget ourselves while in front of the cinema screen. Only then will we be able to loosen the shackles of our existing subjectivities and open ourselves up to other ways of experiencing and knowing. (Rushton 2009: 53)

For now, though, it is enough to note that there is a range of ways in which visual culture theorists have conceptualised the workings of the site of the image itself; subsequent chapters will develop their methodological implications.

2.4 The Site of Audiencing

audiencing

You might well not agree with Pollock's interpretation of the Doisneau photograph, and I will discuss in this section some of the other interpretations of the image made by students in some of my classes. Your disagreement, 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, too, claims that the Doisneau image is always seen as a joke against the woman, because the organisation 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 organisation 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 sympathises with that look. Indeed, many of my students often commented that the photograph shows the man (agreeing with Pollock, then, that the photograph is centred on the man) as a 'lecher', 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? What are the differences between looking at the photograph in Figure 2.2 when it was first published in a magazine, from looking at it framed in an art gallery, to looking at it on a website offering a print of it for sale (Figure 2.3)?

Clearly at one level these are technological questions concerning the size, contrast and stability, for example, of the image (as Hayles [2004: 74]



Figure 2.3
screenshot of
photographers
gallery.com

points out, an image on a digital screen is constantly being refreshed by screen hardware). 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 are surfing through a website gallery at home as you do when you are in a gallery looking at framed photograph. While you are looking at a computer screen you can also be listening to music, eating, comparing one site to another, answering the phone; in a gallery there will be no background music, you are expected to remain quiet, not to touch the pictures, not to eat ... again, the audiencing of an image thus appears very important to its meanings.

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 that 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, for example, 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 are looking at it often (I hope – although this work on audiences suggests you may well not be bothering to do that) and looking at in different ways depending on the issues I am raising. But many of Doisneau's photographs have been reproduced in quite different formats. You would be doing this photograph very differently if you had been sent it as a postcard. 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 would see it as some sort of comment on your relationship ... and so on.

There is actually surprisingly little discussion of these sorts of issues in the literature on visual culture, even though 'audience studies', which most often explore how people watch television and videos in their homes, has been an important part of cultural studies for some time. There is an important and relevant body of work in anthropology too which explores what effects images have when they are gifted, traded or sold. Chapter 10 of this book will explore these two approaches to the site of audiencing in more detail. As we will see, these approaches rely on research methods that pay as much attention, if not more, to the various doings of images' viewers than to the images themselves. This is because many of those concerned with audiences argue that audiences are the most important aspect of an image's meaning. Thus they can, on occasion, like those studies that privilege the social modality of the site of production of imagery, 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 10 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 seemed to me that as I showed 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. As time went on, though, another response was made more frequently. And that was to wonder what the woman is looking at. For in a way, Pollock's argument replicates what she criticises: the denial of vision to the woman. Instead, more and more of my students started to speculate on what the woman in the photo is admiring. Women students began quite often to 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 later responses depended on three things, I think. One was the increasing representation over those few years of male bodies as objects of desire in advertising (especially, it seemed to me, in perfume adverts); we are more used now to seeing men on display as well as women. Another development was what I would very cautiously describe as 'girlpower'; the apparently increasing ability of young women to say what they want. And a third development might have been the fashionability in Britain of what was called 'lesbian chic', as well as a greater tolerance of diverse sexualities. 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 sexualities and at two slightly different historical moments.

What I have just described is an example of different meanings being made from the same image: I have suggested how Figure 2.2 can be interpreted differently by different people. A further aspect of audiencing involves audiences developing those other meanings by producing their own materials – visual and in other media – from what they see. A good discussion of this phenomenon can be found in Henry Jenkins's (1992, 2006, 2008) studies of the fans of various cult TV programmes and films in the United States: *American Idol*, *Survivor*, the *Matrix* films, *Star Trek*, among others. He explores the ways in which these fans engage with their favourite TV series or film, to the extent that they actually rework the imagery and narrative of their favourite show, and in so doing create new (or new-ish) visual materials with their own meanings. This could involve simply using a recording to study specific parts of a TV series in order to develop an complex elaboration of the series's storyline; or it could involve putting together a fanzine or fan website, or writing a new script for a TV episode, individually or collectively; or creating something with the same characters and basic scenario but in a different medium, for example as a comic, a cookbook or a Lego animated film (try searching 'Lego' and 'star wars' on YouTube).

(a)

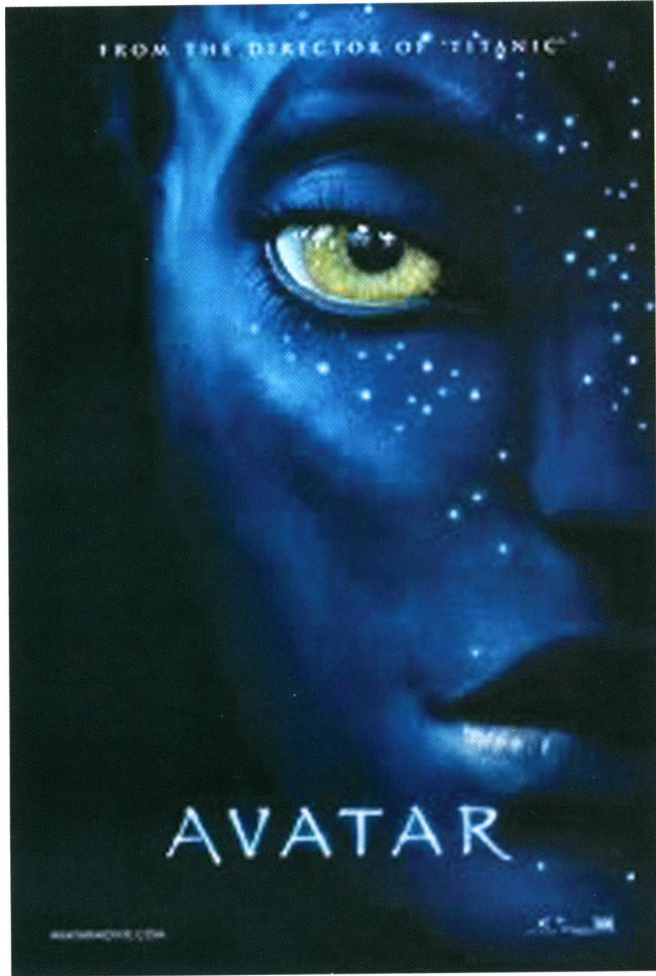


Figure 2.4 (a)
a poster for
the film
Avatar, 2009

(b)



Figure 2.4 (b)
an image
from an
online tutorial
on how to
turn any
digital photo
of a face into
a Na'vi face
using the
photo editing
software
Photoshop

(c)



Figure 2.4 (c)
Ben Stiller as
a Na'vi,
presenting
the Oscar for
Best Makeup
in 2010

(d)



Figure 2.4 (d)
two protestors at
the annual
general meeting
of a mining
company
proposing to
mine the sacred
mountain of the
Dongria Kondh
tribe in India

© Marc Cowan/
Survival. Survival
International
supports the right
of tribal peoples
worldwide,
helping to defend
their lives, protect
their lands and
determine their
own futures. For
more information,
films and
photographs log
onto www.survivalinternational.org

A few Na'vi's, suggesting some aspects of convergence culture

Now, of course, it is not only fans who put the characters of films and TV series into a range of different media. For some time now, the producers of films and television series have also been doing the same thing: to take just one recent example, the release of the film *Avatar* was accompanied by computer and handheld console games, figurines, an official film website, t-shirts, novels, posters and much more. As a result, those blue Na'vi folk, or approximations of them, could be seen in all sorts of places other than the film during 2009, put there by both 20th Century Fox and fans as well as by various satirists and jokesters (Figure 2.4). Figure 2.4a shows the original poster, as well as various other Na'vi. The poster is interesting in itself; it carries far less text compared to the average movie poster, concentrating entirely on the digitally-generated face of a Na'vi. The only thing we need to know about the film, apparently, is that it is 'From the director of "Titanic"'. Not only does this give some idea of what sort of film it might be – a dramatic story, with fantastic special effects – it also assumes that whoever is looking at the poster is versed in the directors of other recent movies. That is, it assumes an audience knowledgeable about films. Indeed, its focus on the Na'vi face enabled the other Na'vi's in Figure 2.4 to appear, even if none of the creators of those other Na'vi had seen the film itself. The poster was part of a spread of Na'vi across contemporary visual culture in 2009. For Jenkins (2008), that spread was part of a broader condition of contemporary visual culture that he calls **convergence**. Convergence is not driven by technologies:

convergence

Convergence does not depend on any specific delivery system. Rather, convergence represents a paradigm shift – a move from medium-specific content towards content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture. (Jenkins 2008: 254)

Convergence culture, he says, undoes any consistent relation between content and the medium that delivers it, and between producers and audiences. Things like the Na'vi, for example, are no longer confined to films and to the publicity for films, like the poster in Figure 2.4a; they travel well beyond that, and are created in many different situations.

The Doisneau photograph in Figure 2.2 has certainly been caught up in convergence culture. I have already noted that many of his photographs have been made into postcards, posters and cards (although this has not happened to this particular photograph, as far as I know). However, this particular photo has become part of slide shows uploaded onto two of the largest photo- and video-sharing websites, Flickr and YouTube. Flickr has it on the pages of several individuals and there is also a Flickr group called 'Hommage à Doisneau', while on YouTube you can

focus

It is worthwhile pausing here and noting what the concept of convergence means for the notion of a **medium**, because it has implications for understanding the technological modality of both production and audiencing.

medium

For media theorist Marshall McLuhan, writing in the 1960s, a medium is the technology used to transmit messages. Thus television, as a physical object, is a medium, regardless of whether it was showing a soap opera made for TV or a Hollywood movie (hence McLuhan's claim that 'the medium is the message'). Usage of the term 'new media' can follow the same logic, since 'new' is often used simply as a synonym for 'digital'. And as Chapter 1 noted, some critics, like Sean Cubitt (2006), suggest that 'new media' in this sense is just too broad a category to be meaningful.

The term 'medium', though, can also be used to refer to a specific kind of cultural text, such as 'news' or 'soap opera' (in a similar fashion to 'genre'). In the era of mass media, however, particular kinds of technologies tended to carry their own sorts of texts. So a medium is also often understood as *both* the technology of transmission *and* the sort of images it carries; hence Jenkins's (2008: 254) reference above to 'medium-specific content'. Roger Silverstone (1994) called this the 'double articulation' of the notion of medium. A medium is both an image and its support: a TV programme and the television, a canvas and the paint.

W.J.T Mitchell, however, has developed an even more expansive definition of medium. For him, a medium consists of 'the entire range of practices that make it possible for images to be embodied in the world as pictures' (Mitchell 2005a: 198). So fine art paintings, for example, are 'not just the canvas and the paint, but the stretcher and the studio, the gallery, the museum, the collector, and the dealer-critic system' (2005a: 198). This definition of medium not only depends on the technology of transmission and the images it carries, but also on the social institutions and practices that keep that alignment of technology and image in place. Gane and Beer (2008) have attempted to recuperate the term 'new media' by defining it in a similarly expanded manner: their argument is that new media should be understood in terms of networks, information, interfaces, archives, interactivity and simulation, which is also an effort to align what is carried, how it is carried and how people encounter it. This expanded notion of a medium is certainly useful for a critical visual methodology because it focuses on what an image shows, how it is showing it, and to whom – all important questions if the social effect of an image is to be ascertained.

Many relatively longstanding alignments between visual content, mode of transmission and audiencing are robust and persist, so that we can still call television or painting a 'medium' in this expanded sense. However, under the conditions of convergence culture, many other alignments of image, transmission and audience are also proliferating. Images can be transmitted via many different technologies; the same technology can show very different kinds of images; audiences can watch the same thing via different transmission technologies, or different things on the same technology. So to see a movie, you

(Continued)

(Continued)

no longer have to go to a cinema to see it projected onto a screen from film stock; you can also watch it on your TV from a DVD, or on your iPod. To look at a van Gogh painting, you no longer have to go to the art gallery where the original is hung on display; you can also see it on the gallery's website, or indeed on a pencil case, key ring, tea towel or mouse mat; and there are 'Na'vis' in all sorts of places (see Figures 2.4 and 10.4).

If an image is produced – Figure 2.2, say, an analogue photograph most likely intended for publication in a mass circulation magazine – and is then transmitted – via a commercial, web-based photography gallery, for example – then some scholars want to make a distinction between the 'original' medium and an image's subsequent incarnations as it travels. Rodowick, for example, distinguishes between a medium and its 'mode of transmission' (Rodowick 2007: 32). For others, though, like Jenkins, convergence makes the notion of an original medium harder to sustain. He is more interested in exploring how something – meaning content of some kind – plays itself out across multiple media – meaning multiple technologies of transmission. Both positions, interestingly, find the expanded notion of a medium hard to sustain.

watch a slideshow of Doisneau photographs including this one, accompanied, if you wish, by what to my ears is a rather cheesy soundtrack of accordion music. Sadly, I could not find this particular photograph converted into a Lego scenario, but what is possibly Doisneau's most famous photograph has been given the Lego treatment and is available to view on Flickr (Figure 2.5).

There are, then, two aspects of the social modality of audiencing: the social practices of spectating, which include not only looking at images but also creating other versions of them, 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



Figure 2.5
Copia d'arte
 lego –
 homage
 Robert
 Doisneau, by
 Marco Pece
 alias
 Udronotto,
 created in
 2008 and
 downloaded
 from Flickr in
 2010

© Marco Pece
 alias Udronotto

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 (and see Bennett 2009). 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 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, of cute animals, of 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, someone who went to European art galleries. And students tell me that they often think about the images with which they decorate their rooms in the same manner. We know what we like, but we also know that other people will be looking at the images we choose to display. 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 10. 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 that into your interpretation, or perhaps express it visually. Exactly what this call to reflexivity means is a question that will recur throughout this book, and Chapter 12 also discusses some of the ethical issues that arise when working with visual images.

Summary

As the previous chapter argued, a critical visual methodology must be concerned with the social effects of the visual materials it is studying. This chapter has argued that the social effects of an image or set of images are made at three sites – the sites of production, the site of the image itself, and the site of its audiencing – and 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, and why. These debates affect the methodology that is most appropriately brought to bear on particular images; all of the methods discussed in this book are better at focusing on some sites and modalities than others. Their sites and modalities will structure all the subsequent chapters' discussions of methods.

Further reading

Sturken and Cartwright's *Practices of Looking* (2009) is an excellent overview of theoretical approaches to visual culture, and of many of its empirical manifestations in the affluent world today. Although they do not use the terminology of sites and modalities, their discussions could certainly be read in those terms.