

Review:

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Gillian Rose (2001). Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials. London: Sage, 229 pages, Cloth (ISBN 0 7619 6664 1) £ 60.00, Paper (ISBN 0 7619 6665 X) £ 18.99

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Abstract: This intriguing, if somewhat difficult book, introduces the idea that we need methodologies to interpret the plethora of visual stimuli surrounding us. We can understand our culture through various visual representations. Further, there is not a single way of interpreting, but rather multiple ways. ROSE examines such diverse approaches as semiology, psychoanalysis, discourse analysis, and content analysis. Three questions are at the core of her work: Why is it important to consider visual images? Why is it important to be critical about those images? Why is it important to reflect on your critique? The author provides a comprehensive overview and history of this burgeoning field.

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1. Introduction

This eight chapter book was first published in 2001 and reprinted the same year. ROSE is a senior lecturer at the Open University and taught courses on the interpretation of visual culture at Edinburgh University in the late 90s. Little was provided about the author, but I learned somewhat more about her at her web site.

"My current research involves a critical engagement with the notion of visual culture. I'm interested in the ways in which social subjectivities are pictured or made invisible, and how those processes are embedded in power relations. I have a long-standing interest in feminist film theory and Foucauldian and feminist accounts of photography and I'm particularly concerned to ground these theoretical approaches by undertaking specific empirical studies. I have also written about methodologies for interpreting visual images." [<http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/staff/grose/info.html>] [1]

According to the author, the target audience for the book is the undergraduate student. While she acknowledges that much of what is out there today is visual and that there is a "huge amount of academic work" on visual things, there are few guides to "methods of interpretation" and fewer "explanations of how to do those methods" (p.2). I assumed, then, that she was trying to fill such a void.

Unfortunately, I do not think her aims were very well met. This will be addressed later in my review. [2]

Given my background in qualitative research design and in art education and the history of art, I approached the reading of this book with considerable interest. I was not quite sure what this book was supposed to be about, but assumed that it would provide a framework to help interpret the visual world through a variety of lenses. In the initial chapter, ROSE introduces the reader to, and provides a detailed explanation of what she means by, critical visual methodology. Chapter 2 pulls us in with the intriguing title "The good eye: Looking at pictures using compositional interpretation." Will I find here ways to evaluate or judge the quality of a picture? I remain open. Content analysis is the subject of chapter 3. I know about content analysis with words and textual documents; I wonder what I will learn here? Chapter 4 considers semiology or laying bare the prejudices beneath the smooth surface of the beautiful. Chapter 5 on psychoanalysis is of great interest as I just completed reading *Art and Psychoanalysis* (ADAMS, 1994). Discourse analysis is covered in the following two chapters. Chapter 8 concludes with mixed and other methods. This overview should help you gain an understanding of the book's content. [3]

2. The Thesis of her Work

I learned from the introduction that ROSE examines how one interprets images—not looking necessarily for the truth, but with some justification for your interpretation. How you will go about that interpretation is partly what the book is about. What are the methods that you can use to interpret images? In contrast to a statistical methodology, for example, the methods you use to interpret visual images are not "neutral." Debates abound on the topic and ROSE purports to address them in her first chapter. Her position, like that of some others, concerns itself with cultural meaning and power. And ROSE cautions us about interpreting visual images—do not depend just on the method. Rather, look at the "pleasure, thrills, fascination, wonder, fear or revulsion ... Use your methodology to discipline your passion, not to deaden it." (p.4) [4]

Three questions are at the core of her work: Why is it important to consider visual images? Why is it important to be critical about those images? Why is it important to reflect on your critique? ROSE then arrives at a critical visual methodology in which she explores the visual in terms of cultural significance, social practices and power relations. So now we have it. Each chapter looks at one method and usually one kind of visual image, including paintings, photos, film, television soaps, and advertisements. She omits video, the web, maps and medical imaging. Each chapter is written as a case study in which she identifies a particular example that uses the approach in question. [5]

Before I get too far into my analysis, I think it important to understand ROSE's position vis-à-vis the visual. She suggests that in the last several decades social scientists have come to understand social life by looking at how it is constructed through ideas that people have about it. She adopts the position that culture is

not just a group of things but a process that represents the give and take of meaning shared between members of a given group. In particular, she suggests that "the visual" is key in the "cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western societies." (p.6) I concur and I suspect readers who will be drawn to this book will agree also. We are bombarded daily with images—on television especially, but also in newspapers, in film, billboards, magazines, videos, paintings, computer graphics, magnetic resonance imaging, and photography. And the content of these images can range from news events, advertisements, fictional stories, reality television, and the like. Now the key point she makes is that the production of the image(s) is never innocent. Images are not "transparent windows" but rather interpret the world. ROSE provides a fairly complete history of the visual and of related terms such as vision, visibility, scopic regime, and ocularcentrism (centrality of the visual to contemporary life). Making meaning of these diverse images and our role in the meaning is a key theme for her. [6]

ROSE posits that a new field of study—that of visual culture—has emerged. Her careful review of the current literature reveals five central points: 1) images themselves do something, 2) a concern for the way images either reveal or hide social difference, 3) how images look and how images are looked at, 4) emphasis on how visual images are seen in terms of a larger cultural milieu, and 5) what the audience brings to the image. Since this is a book about visual images, she makes good use of such images scattered throughout her book. For example, she highlights BERGER's (1972) analysis of female nudes in Western art and the construction of masculinity. As an aside, it is unfortunate that these images are so small and in black and white. The reader can have a much better understanding with more suitable representations. [7]

Finally reaching her point, ROSE argues that to develop a critical approach to the interpretation of visual images the viewer is to be guided by three things: take each image seriously, think about the social conditions and effects of visual objects, and consider your own way of looking at images. She suggests that social scientists generally do not take images seriously, at least not in the way of an art historian. I am reminded of a friend of a friend, a professor of dermatology at a prominent US university, who routinely takes his students to art museums to train them to see/look more carefully. [8]

ROSE is very careful in her purpose in writing this book. She says she wants to give the reader some practical assistance on how to look at visuals, while at the same time recognizing the importance of various theoretical debates going on. Think about this. Meanings of an image are made at three sites: the production of the image, the image itself, and the audience. Further, she suggests there are three modalities that can assist in a critical understanding of images: technological, compositional, social. If you, as a reader, are interested in the various issues surrounding the disputes regarding the relationship among these three sites and modalities, you can read a clear description here. ROSE provides a concrete example of how to understand images (the production, the image, and the audience) and the modalities (technological, compositional, social). [9]

I found her comment about photographs quite interesting. Quoting SLATER (1995), ROSE states that photographs from the very beginning have been seen as "magical and strange." (p.19) Most of us are familiar with the notion that photographs record the way things look and photo-realism and documentary photography have been popular for quite some time. Yet, I hear many decry photo manipulations via computers as somehow being a violation of the intention of photography. ROSE occasionally illustrates her arguments with visual presentations. Her detailed explanation of DOISNEAU's 1948 photograph was fascinating and I found myself immediately online learning more about this photographer. If you are unfamiliar with the "Oblique Look," do yourself a favor and locate it and think about its meaning. Then ask others to provide meaning. And then return to it. Your eyes will be open wide. [10]

I would assume that most qualitative researchers are quite unfamiliar with the ideas proffered by ROSE. But one idea that is important to her is that as an audience to a photograph, you bring to it your own ways of seeing as well as other knowledge. This phrase should strike a familiar ring to the qualitative researcher. [11]

3. Details of Visual Analysis

The organization of each chapter is similar: an introduction, several headings, a summary, and black and white images designed to illustrate various points. I am going to focus on certain chapters as they serve to illustrate the author's position and intention in this very intriguing work. [12]

Here are some overall ideas on selected chapters. Her chapter entitled "The good eye" offers the reader a fairly straightforward approach on how to interpret a painting, especially from a standard art history point of view. Its stress is on an analysis of the composition of a painting, including such traditional art elements as composition, color, line, and perspective. I wonder what ROSE would have to say about GILJE's recreations of iconic paintings as parodies of, and challenges to, the old boys club of traditional art history (NOCHLIN, 2002). Her chapter on content analysis is the most quantitative and "scientific" of the chapters. ROSE refrains from suggesting that one approach to visual analysis is preferable to another. I suspect, however, that she does not prefer content analysis as it may be too limiting in that the viewer and his/her viewpoint is not taken into account in a visual analysis. I found her chapter on semiology the most difficult to read and understand. Here is ROSE's summary statement: "semiology depends on the distinction between the signifier and the signified of the sign. This distinction enables semiology to focus on the transfers of signifieds between signs" (p.99). I would have liked to see this edited and the meaning made clearer by reducing the highly technical language. The chapter on psychoanalysis is written from a strongly feminist perspective. ROSE relies heavily on FOUCAULT in her chapters on discourse analysis. In these, she introduces two ideas: One form of discourse analysis pays attention to discourse as seen through different kinds of visual images. The other is concerned with issues of power, "regimes of truth," and

technologies. She does not say much about TUFTE's thesis (1983) of how visual and graphic information is displayed. [13]

4. Some Shortcomings

This is a very difficult book to read. It is particularly compact and comprehensive and many new ideas are introduced that will challenge the reader. I found myself going to the Internet to have a longer look at a particular reference or image. I think that is what a good book does; it stimulates the reader to think and look further. ROSE introduces a number of thought-provoking ideas, including the relationship of the powerful and the powerless, masculinity and femininity, men and women appear. And yet I wish this book were more approachable and readable. I found myself thinking about BERGER's very accessible book on *Ways of Seeing* (BERGER, 1972) and wish that this book was as easy to comprehend. [14]

I have to say that although I was considerably interested and somewhat knowledgeable about the general topic, I was somewhat disappointed in the book. ROSE obviously has a wide range of knowledge and quotes many sources. If that's what you are looking for, go for it. But there is very little of the "how to" in this book and one would be hard pressed to come away with a clear idea of how to interpret advertisements using a semiologic approach unless you already had a background in the topic or knew how to interpret films from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. The vocabulary ROSE introduces is very specific to each methodology and many terms may be unknown even to the trained reader. For example, in discussing semiology, she refers to syntagmatic, diegesis, and synecdochal. Likewise, she often chooses terms that seem unusual (e.g. invisibilized) when a simpler term would be clearer and less stilted. The detail provided in explaining different approaches is at times interesting, but it does not necessarily help the reader understand how the methodology might be used in the interpretation of visual images. I was disappointed in the images, but I suspect this was an issue related to cost rather than style. [15]

I wanted more about how these different perspectives help the qualitative researcher in a quest for gaining understanding and meaning of our increasingly visual culture. So my advice is mixed. For some new and challenging ideas, you ought to read this book. But do not expect an easy go of it. [16]

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