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Researching visual materials: towards a critical visual methodology

Rose, Gillian, (2007) "Researching visual materials: towards a critical visual methodology" from Rose, Gillian, *Visual methodologies : an introduction to the interpretation of visual materials* pp.1-27, London: Sage ©

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ISBN: 1412921910

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researching visual materials
towards a critical visual methodology

Choosing a research methodology means developing a research question and the tools to generate evidence for its answer; both of these should be consistent with a theoretical framework. This chapter explores recent debates about the visual to help you develop that framework. To do that, it:

- discusses a range of literature which explores the importance of the visual to contemporary Western societies;
- offers a broad analytical framework for understanding how images have social effects;
- suggests some criteria for a critical approach to visual materials;
- and sets up the approach to discussing methods that the rest of this book relies on.

1 an introductory survey of 'the visual'

Beginning in the 1970s, and over the following three decades, the social sciences experienced a significant change in their understanding of social life. This change is often described as the 'cultural turn'. That is, 'culture' became a crucial means by which many social scientists understood social processes, social identities, and social change and conflict. **Culture** is a complex concept, but, in very broad terms, the result of its deployment has been that social scientists are now very often interested in the ways in which social life is constructed through the ideas that people have about it, and the practices that flow from those ideas. To quote one of the major contributors to this shift, Stuart Hall:

culture

> Culture, it is argued, is not so much a set of things – novels and paintings or TV programmes or comics – as a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings – the 'giving and taking of meaning' – between the members of a society or group

> ... Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways. (Hall 1997a: 2)

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

representations

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

vision

visuality

scopic regime

For some writers, the visual is the most fundamental of all senses. Gordon Fyfe and John Law (1988: 2), for example, claim that 'depiction, picturing and seeing are ubiquitous features of the process by which most human beings come to know the world as it really *is* for them', and John Berger (1972: 7) suggests that this is because 'seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.' (Clearly these writers pay little attention to those who are born blind.) Other writers, however, prefer to historicize the importance of the visual, tracing what they see as the increasing saturation of Western societies by visual images. Many claim that this process has reached unprecedented levels, so that Westerners now interact with the world mainly through how we see it. Martin Jay (1993) has used the term **ocularcentrism** to describe the apparent centrality of the visual to contemporary Western life.

ocularcentrism

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

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

Barbara Maria Stafford (1991), a historian of images used in the sciences, has argued that, in a [illegible]s beginning in the eighteenth century, the construction of scientific knowledges about the world has become more and more based on images rather than on written texts; Jenks (1995) suggests that it is the valorization of science in Western cultures that has allowed everyday understandings to make the same connection between seeing and knowing. However, that connection was also made in other fields of modern practice. Richard Rorty (1980), for example, traces the development of this conflation of seeing with knowing to the intersection of several ideas central to eighteenth century philosophy. Judith Adler (1989) examines tourism and argues that, between 1600 and 1800, the travel of European elites was defined increasingly as a visual practice, based first on 'an overarching scientific ideology that cast even the most humble tourists as part of ... the impartial survey of all creation' (Adler 1989: 24), and later on a particular appreciation of spectacular visual and artistic beauty. John Urry (1990) has sketched the outline of a rather different 'tourist gaze' which he argues is typical of the mass tourism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see also Pratt 1992). Other writers have made other arguments for the importance of the visual to modern societies. The work of Michel Foucault explores the way in which many nineteenth century institutions depended on various forms of surveillance (1977) (Chapters 7 and 8 here examine the methodological implications of his work); and in his study of nineteenth century world fairs and exhibitions, Timothy Mitchell (1988) shows how European societies represented the whole world as an exhibition. Deborah Poole (1997) has traced how visions of that modernity were thoroughly racialized in the same period. In

the twentieth century, Guy Debord (1977) claims that the world has turned into a 'society of the spectacle', and Paul Virilio (1994) argues that new visualizing technologies have created 'the vision machine' in which we are all caught. The use of the term '**visual culture**' refers to the plethora of ways in which the visual is part of social life.

visual culture

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

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

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

simulacrum

This story about the increasing extent and changing nature of visual culture in modernity and postmodernity is not without its critics, however (see, for example, the debates in the journal *October* [1996] and the *Journal of Visual Culture* [2001; 2003]). Two points of debate, for example, are the history and geography of this account. Jeffrey Hamburger (1997), to take just one example, argues that visual images were central to certain kinds of premodern, medieval spirituality, and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1998) have argued forcefully against the Eurocentrism that pervades many discussions of 'the visual'. The work of Hamburger (1997) and Shohat and Stam (1998), among others, makes it clear that if a narrative of increasing ocularcentrism in the West can be told, it must be much more nuanced, historically and

geographically, than has so far been the case (see also Brennan and Jay 1996; Cheetham et al. 2005; Pinney 2003).

There are also debates about the social relations within which these visualities are embedded, and particularly about the effects of simulacra. Baudrillard, for example, has often been accused of uncritically celebrating the simulacrum without regard for the often very unequal social relations that can be articulated through it, and the work of Donna Haraway (1991) is taken by many as a salutary reminder of what is at stake in contemporary ocularcentrism (see also Sturken and Cartwright 2001; Lister and Wells 2001). Like many others, Haraway (1991) notes the contemporary proliferation of visualizing technologies in scientific and everyday use, and she characterizes the scopic regime associated with these technologies thus: 'vision in this technological feast becomes unregulated gluttony; all perspective gives way to infinitely mobile vision, which no longer seems just mythically about the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere, but to have put the myth into ordinary practice' (Haraway 1991: 189). Haraway is concerned to specify the social power relations that are articulated through this particular form of visuality, however. She argues that contemporary, unregulated visual gluttony is available to only a few people and institutions, in particular those that are part of the 'history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy' (Haraway 1991: 188). She argues that what this visuality does is to produce specific visions of social difference – of hierarchies of class, 'race', gender, sexuality and so on – while itself claiming not to be part of that hierarchy and thus to be universal. It is because this ordering of difference depends on a distinction between those who claim to see with universal relevance, and those who are seen and categorized in particular ways, that Haraway claims it is intimately related to the oppressions and tyrannies of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy and so on. Part of Haraway's critical project, then, is to examine in detail how certain institutions mobilize certain forms of visuality to see, and to order, the world. This dominant visuality denies the validity of other ways of visualizing social difference, but Haraway insists that there are indeed other ways of seeing the world, and she is especially interested in efforts to see social difference in non-hierarchical ways. For Haraway, as for many other writers, then, the dominant scopic regime of (post)modernity is neither a historical inevitability, nor is it uncontested. There are different ways of seeing the world, and the critical task is to differentiate between the social effects of those different visions.

The particular forms of representation produced by specific scopic regimes are important to understand, then, because they are intimately bound into social power relations. Although we will later hear some misgivings about some of the results of this sort of argument (see section 4.2 in this chapter), Haraway's (1991) argument makes clear the necessity of understanding what social relations produce, and are reproduced by, what forms of visuality, and the next section explores this argument more fully.

Before doing so, however, it is important to note that there is a dispersed but persistent body of work in the social sciences that uses various kinds of images as ways of answering research questions (questions which may not be directly concerned with visuality or visual culture), not by examining images but by making them. Visual anthropology and human geography have used visual images as research tools for as long as they have been established as academic disciplines, mostly photographs, diagrams and film in the case of anthropology, and photos, maps and diagrams in the case of geography. Visual sociology as a distinct sub-discipline is a more recent development; although the earliest sociological journals carried photographs for a short period before the First World War, it was not until the 1960s that a book by an anthropologist encouraged some sociologists to pick up their cameras again (Collier 1967). Researchers in these fields are taking heart from the current interest in questions of visuality to argue with greater conviction than ever for the analytical power of visual materials produced as part of a research project (see, for example, Banks 2001; Emmison and Smith 2000; Knowles and Sweetman 2004; Pink 2006; Prosser 1998; van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001). However, when social scientists are making their own images, their concern for the power relations which those images are embedded takes a specific form: it becomes a discussion of research ethics which reflects on the power dynamics between the researcher, the researched and the images. Chapter 11 of this book examines both the arguments for making visual images as a means of answering research questions, and the question of research ethics in relation to that making.

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

Making images as a way of answering a research question is relatively rare in studies of visual culture however. Instead, visual culture critics have concentrated their energies on critically examining the effects of visual images already out there in the world, already part of visual culture, and Chapters 3 to 10 of this book discuss a range of methods for understanding such 'found' images. This body of work has developed from several different theoretical positions (Barnard 2001; Bird et al. 1996; Evans and Hall 1999). Much of it is concerned to interpret the meaning of visual images, though some focuses more on practices of visuality or on the agency of visual objects; there are many historical studies, although some dispute the possibility of a fully historical account of an image's effect; some studies are more closely aligned with established academic disciplines like art history or cultural studies than others; some are structuralist and others post-structuralist; most of their methods are qualitative. This diversity obviously makes generalizing about studies of visuality a difficult task.

Nevertheless, I am going to suggest that there are five aspects of the recent literature that engage with visual culture that I think are valuable for thinking about the social effects of images.

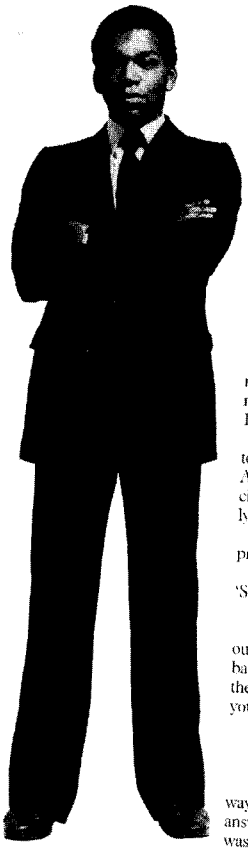
The first point I take from the literature on (or against) 'visual culture' is its concern for the way in which images visualize (or render invisible) social difference. As Fyfe and Law (1988: 1) say, 'a depiction is never just an illustration ... it is the site for the construction and depiction of social difference'. One of the central aims of 'the cultural turn' in the social sciences was to argue that social categories are not natural but instead are constructed. These constructions can take visual form. This point has been made most forcefully by feminist and postcolonial writers who have studied the ways femininity and blackness have been visualized. An example would be Paul Gilroy's (1987: 57–9) discussion of a poster used by the Conservative Party in Britain's 1983 General Election, reproduced in Figure 1.1.

The poster shows a young black man in a suit, with 'LABOUR SAYS HE'S BLACK. TORIES SAY HE'S BRITISH' as its headline text. Gilroy's discussion is detailed but his main point is that the poster offers a choice between being black and being British, not only in its text but also in its image. The fact that the black man is pictured wearing a suit suggests to Gilroy that 'blacks are being invited to forsake all that marks them out as culturally distinct before real Britishness can be guaranteed' (Gilroy 1987: 59). Gilroy is thus suggesting that this poster asks its viewers not to see blackness. However, he also points out that the poster depends on other stereotyped images (which it does not show) of young black men, particularly as muggers, to make its point about the acceptability of this besuited man. This poster thus plays in complex ways with both visible and invisible signs of racial difference. Hence Fyfe and Law's general prescription for a critical approach to the ways images can picture social power relations:

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

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

Secondly, writers on visual culture, among others, are concerned not only with how images look, but how images are looked at. This is a key point made by Maria Sturken and Lisa Cartwright's (2001) book on visual culture, which they entitle *Practices of Looking*. They argue that what is important about images is not simply the image itself, but how it is seen by particular spectators who look in particular ways. Sturken and Cartwright (2001) take



With the Conservatives, there are no 'blacks,' no 'whites,' just people.

Conservatives believe that treating minorities as equals encourages the majority to treat them as equals.

Yet the Labour Party aim to treat you as a 'special case,' as a group all on your own.

Is setting you apart from the rest of society a sensible way to overcome racial prejudice and social inequality?

The question is, should we really divide the British people instead of uniting them?

WHOSE PROMISES ARE YOU TO BELIEVE?

When Labour were in government, they promised to repeal Immigration Acts passed in 1962 and 1971. Both promises were broken.

This time, they are promising to throw out the British Nationality Act, which gives full and equal citizenship to everyone permanently settled in Britain.

But how do the Conservatives' promises compare?

We said that we'd abolish the 'SUS' law.

We kept our promise.

We said we'd recruit more coloured policemen, get the police back into the community, and train them for a better understanding of your needs.

We kept our promise.

PUTTING THE ECONOMY BACK ON IT'S FEET.

The Conservatives have always said that the only long term answer to our economic problems was to conquer inflation.

Inflation is now lower than it's been for over a decade, keeping all prices stable, with the price of food now hardly rising at all.

Meanwhile, many businesses throughout Britain are recovering, leading to thousands of new jobs.

Firstly, in our traditional industries, but just as importantly in new technology areas such as microelectronics.

In other words, the medicine is working.

Yet Labour want to change everything, and put us back to square one.

They intend to increase taxation. They intend to increase the National Debt.

They promise import and export controls.

Cast your mind back to the last Labour government. Labour's methods didn't work then.

They won't work now.

A BETTER BRITAIN FOR ALL OF US.

The Conservatives believe that everyone wants to work hard and be rewarded for it.

Those rewards will only come about by creating a mood of equal opportunity for everyone in Britain, regardless of their race, creed or colour.

The difference you're voting for is this:

To the Labour Party, you're a black person.

To the Conservatives, you're a British Citizen.

Vote Conservative, and you vote for a more equal, more prosperous Britain.

LABOUR SAYS HE'S BLACK. TORIES SAY HE'S BRITISH.

CONSERVATIVE ☒

Figure 1.1 *Conservative Party election poster, 1983 (Gilroy 1987: 58)*

their inspiration on this point from an influential book written in 1972 by John Berger, cal*ways of Seeing*. Berger's argument there is important because he makes clear that images of social difference work not simply by what they show but also by the kind of seeing that they invite. He uses the expression '**ways of seeing**' to refer to the fact that 'we never look just at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves' (Berger 1972: 9). His best-known example is that of the genre of female nude

ways of seeing

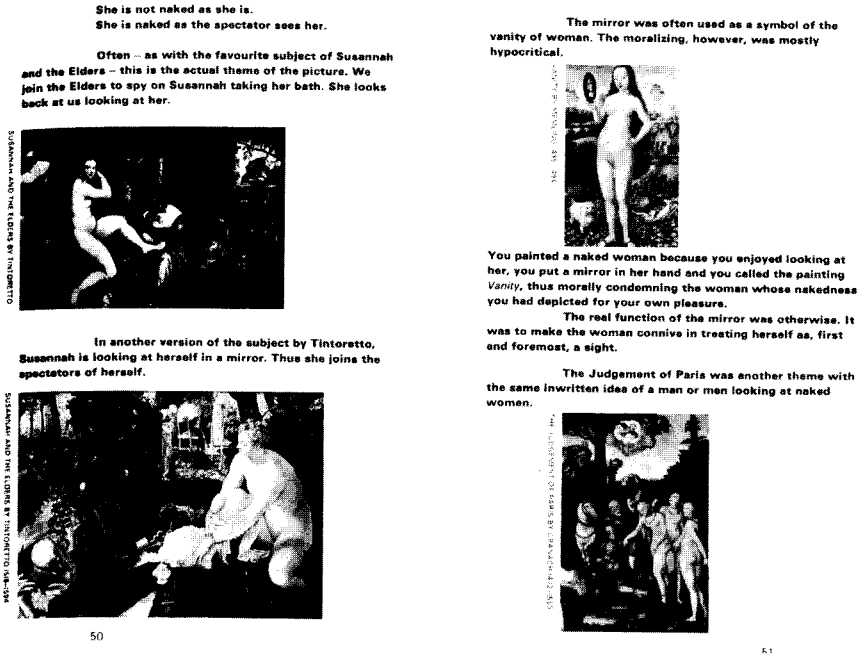


Figure 1.2 *a double-page spread from John Berger's* Ways of Seeing (*Berger 1972: 50–1)*

painting in Western art. He reproduces many examples of that genre (see Figure 1.2), pointing out as he does so the particular ways they represent women: as unclothed, as vain, as passive, as sexually alluring, as a spectacle to be assessed.

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

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

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

> One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between women and men but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed, female.

> Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (Berger 1972: 47, emphasis in original)

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

Thirdly, there is the emphasis in the very term 'visual culture' on the embeddedness of visual images in a culture. Now, 'culture', as Raymond Williams (1976) famously noted, is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. It has many connotations. Most pertinent to this discussion is the meaning it began to be given in various anthropological books written towards the end of the nineteenth century. In this usage, culture meant something like 'a whole way of life', and even from the brief discussion in this chapter so far you can see that some current writers are using the term visual culture in just this broad sense. Indeed, one of the first uses of the term 'visual culture', by Svetlana Alpers (1983: xxv), was precisely to emphasize the importance of visual images of all kinds to many aspects of seventeenth century Dutch society. In this sort of work, it is argued that a particular, historically specific visuality was central to a particular, ocularcentric culture. In using the notion of culture in this broad sense, however, certain analytical questions may become difficult to ask. In particular, culture as a whole way of life can slip rather easily into a notion of culture as simply a whole, and the issue of difference becomes obscured. Barbara Maria Stafford's (1996) celebration of the visual in 'our' society has been criticized by Hal Foster (1996) in just these terms. Stafford never specifies who the 'we' to which she refers actually is, and she thus ignores this visuality's possible exclusions as well as the particularities of its inclusions.

In order to be able to deal with questions of social difference and the power relations that sustain them, then, a notion of culture is required that can also address questions of social difference, social relations and social power. One means of keeping these sorts of differentiations in the field of visual culture in analytical focus is to think carefully about just who is able to see what and how, and with what effects. Berger's (1972) work is in some ways exemplary here. An image will depend for its effects on a certain way of seeing, as he argued in relation to female nude painting. But this effect is always embedded in particular cultural practices that are far more specific than 'a way of life'. So Berger talks about the ways in which nude paintings were commissioned and then displayed by their owners in his discussion of the way of seeing which they express. Describing a seventeenth century English example of the genre, he writes:

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

It was through this kind of use, by those particular sorts of people interpreting it in that kind of way, that this kind of painting achieved its effects. The seeing of an image thus always takes place in a particular social context that mediates its impact. It also always takes place in a specific location with its own particular practices. That location may be a king's chamber, a Hollywood cinema studio, an avant-garde art gallery, an archive, a sitting room, a street. These different locations all have their own economics, their own disciplines, their own rules for how their particular sort of spectator should behave, including whether and how they should look, and all these affect how a particular image is seen too (for an early example of this sort of approach, see Becker 1982). These specificities of practice are crucial in understanding how an image has certain effects.

Fourthly, much of this work in visual culture argues that the particular 'audiences' (that might not always be the appropriate word) of an image will bring their own interpretations to bear on its meaning and effect. Not all audiences will be able or willing to respond to the way of seeing invited by a particular image and its particular practices of display (Chapter 9 will discuss this in more detail).

Finally, in all of this work there is an insistence that images themselves have their own agency. In the words of Carol Armstrong (1996: 28), for example, an image is 'at least potentially a site of resistance and recalcitrance, of the irreducibly particular, and of the subversively strange and pleasurable', while Christopher Pinney (2004: 8) suggests that the important question is 'not how images "look", but what they can "do"'. In the search for an image's meaning, it is therefore important not to claim that it merely reflects meanings made elsewhere – in newspapers, for example, or gallery catalogues. It is certainly true that visual images very often work in conjunction with other kinds of representations. It is very unusual, for example, to encounter a visual image unaccompanied by any text at all, whether spoken or written (Armstrong 1998; Wollen 1970: 118); even the most abstract painting in a gallery will have a written label on the wall giving certain information about its making, and in certain sorts of galleries there are sheets of paper giving a price too, and these make a difference to how spectators will see that painting. So although virtually all visual images are **multimodal** in this way – they always make sense in relation to other things, including written texts and very often other images – they are not reducible to the meanings carried by those other things. The colours of an oil painting, for example, or what

multimodal

Barthes (1982) called the *punctum* of a photograph (see Chapter 5, section 3.3), will carry their own peculiar kinds of visual resistance, recalcitrance, argument, particularity, strangeness or pleasure.

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

3 towards a critical visual methodology

Given this general approach to understanding the importance of images, I can now elaborate on what I think is necessary for a 'critical approach' to interpreting found visual images. (The implications of this approach in relation to the production of images as part of a research project are somewhat different, as I've already suggested, and will be discussed in Chapter 11.) A critical approach to visual culture:

- takes images seriously. While this might seem rather a paradoxical point to insist on, given all the work I have just mentioned that addresses visualities and visual objects, art historians of all sorts of interpretive hues continue to complain, often rightly, that social scientists do not look at images carefully enough. I argue here that it is necessary to look very carefully at visual images, and it is necessary to do so because they are not entirely reducible to their context. Visual representations have their own effects.
- thinks about the social conditions and effects of visual objects. As Griselda Pollock (1988: 7) says, 'cultural practices do a job which has major social significance in the articulation of meanings about the world, in the negotiation of social conflicts, in the production of social subjects'. Cultural practices like visual representations both depend on and produce social inclusions and exclusions, and a critical account needs to address both those practices and their cultural meanings and effects.
- considers your own way of looking at images. This is not an explicit concern in many studies of visual culture. However, if, as section 2 just argued, ways of seeing are historically, geographically, culturally and socially specific; and if watching your favourite movie on a DVD for the umpteenth time at home with a group of mates is not the same as studying it for a research project; then, as Mieke Bal (1996, 2003; Bal and Bryson 2001) for one has consistently argued, it is necessary to reflect on how you as a critic of visual images are looking. As Haraway (1991: 190) says, by thinking carefully about where we see from, 'we might become answerable for what we learn how to see'. Haraway also comments that this is not a straightforward task (see also Rogoff 1998; Rose 1997). Several of the chapters will return to this issue of reflexivity in order to examine what it might entail further.

The aim of this book is to give you some practical guidance on how to do these things; but I hope it is already clear from this introduction that this is not simply a technical question of method. There are also important analytical debates going on about visualities. In this book, I use these particular criteria for a critical visual methodology to evaluate both theoretical arguments and the methods discussed in Chapters 3 to 10.

Having very briefly sketched a critical approach to images that I find useful to work with and which will structure this book's accounts of various methods, the next section starts more explicitly to address the question of methodology.

4 towards some methodological tools: sites and modalities

As I have already noted, the theoretical sources which have produced the recent interest in visual culture are diverse. This section will try to acknowledge some of that diversity, while also developing a framework for approaching the almost equally diverse range of methods that critics of visual culture have used.

Interpretations of visual images broadly concur that there are three **sites** at which the meanings of an image are mad 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:

sites
production
image
audiences
modalities

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

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

Many of the theoretical disagreements about visual culture, visualities and visual objects can be understood as disputes over which of these sites and

Figure 1.3

modalities are most important, how and why. The following subsections 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 1.3. Take a good look at it now and note down your immediate reactions. Then see how your views of it alter as the following subsections discuss its sites and modalities.

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

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

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

In the case of the photograph here, it is perhaps important to understand what kind of camera, film and developing process the photographer was using, and what that made visually possible and what impossible. The 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 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 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 section 3.2 of Chapter 5, and Christopher Pinney, discussed in Chapter 10) 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 8 will look at some Foucauldian histories of photography which make this case with some vigour. Maybe we see the Doisneau photograph as a snapshot of real life, then, more because we expect photos to show us snippets of truth than because they actually do. But this photo might have been posed: the photographer who took this one certainly posed others which nevertheless have the same 'real' look (Doisneau 1991). Also, as Griselda Pollock (1988: 85–7) points out in her discussion of this photograph, its status as a snapshot of real life is also established in part by its content, especially the boys playing in the street, just out of focus; surely if it had been posed those boys would have been in focus? Thus the apparently technological effects on the production of a visual image need careful consideration, because some may not be straightforwardly technological at all.

The second modality of an image's production is to do with its *compositionality*. Some writers argue that it is the conditions of an image's production that govern its compositionality. This argument is perhaps most effectively made in relation to the genre of images 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 locations,

genre

and, in the case of movies for example, have a limited set of narrativ problematics. Thus John Berger can define 'female nude painting' as a par ticular genre of Western painting because these are pictures which represen naked women as passive, available and desirable through a fairly consisten set of compositional devices. A certain kind of traditional art history would see the way that a particular artist makes reference to other paintings in the same genre (and perhaps in other genres) as he or she works at a canvas as a crucial aspect of understanding the final painting. It helps to make sense of the significance of elements of an individual image if you know that some of them recur repeatedly in other images. You may need to refer to other images of the same genre in order to explicate aspects of the one you are interested in. Many books on visual images focus on one particular genre.

The photograph under consideration here fits into one genre but has connections to some others, and knowing this allows us to make sense of various aspects of this rich visual document. The genre 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 marginalized individuals, often as part of reformist projects to show the horror of their lives and thus inspire change. The aim was to be as objective and accurate as possible in these depictions. However, since the apparent horror was being shown to audiences who had the power to pressure for change, documentary photography usually pictures the relatively powerless to the relatively powerful. It has thus been accused of voyeurism and worse. Street photography shares with documentary photography the desire to picture life as it apparently is, but street photography does not want its viewers to say 'oh how terrible' and maybe 'we must do something about that'. Rather, its way of seeing invites a response that is more like, 'oh how extraordinary, isn't life richly marvellous'. This seems to me to be the response that this photograph, and many others taken by the same photographer, asks for. We are meant to smile wryly at a glimpse of a relationship, exposed to us for just a second. This photograph was almost certainly made to sell to a photo-magazine like *Vu* 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 organizing itself in ways that are indeed compressing time and collapsing space. He argues that capitalism is more and more 'flexible' in its organization of production techniques, labour markets and consumption niches, and that this has depended on the increased mobility of capital and information; moreover, the importance of consumption niches has generated the increasing importance of advertising, style and spectacle in the selling of goods. In his Marxist account, both these characteristics are reflected in cultural objects – in their superficiality, their ephemerality – so that the latter are nothing but 'the cultural logic of late capitalism' (Harvey 1989: 63; Jameson 1984).

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

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

companies and products, as well as understanding how the industry as a whole works.

Another aspect of the social production of an image is the social and/or political identities that are mobilized in its making. Peter Hamilton's (1997) discussion of the sort of photography of which Figure 1.3 is a part explores its dependence on certain postwar ideas about the French working class. 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 of this chapter). But since this toughness is required only in order to record something that will reveal itself, this passage is also an example of the photograph being seen as a truthful instrument of simple observation, and of the erasure of the specificity of the photographer himself; the photographer is there but only to carry his camera and react quickly when the moment comes,

just like our photographer snapping his subject. Again, this erasure of the particularity of a 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.

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 of 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 Chapter 3, section 3). 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 modalites that shaped the production of his photographs.

auteur theory

4.2 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 1997 for a discussion of photography and commodity culture). Perhaps this accounts for his fascination with objects, with emotion, and with the emotions objects can arouse. Just like an advertiser, he was investing objects with feelings through his images, and, again like an advertiser, could not afford to offend his potential buyers.

However, as section 2 above noted, many writers on visual culture argue that an image may have its own effects which exceed the constraints of its production (and reception). Some would argue, for example, that it is the particular qualities of the photographic image that make us understand its technology in particular ways, rather than the reverse; or that it is those qualities that shape the social modality in which it is embedded rather than the other way round. The modality most important to an image's own effects, 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 organization of looks in the photograph, and argues that 'the photograph almost uncannily delineates the sexual politics of looking'. These are the politics of looking that Berger explored in his discussion of the Western tradition of female nude painting. 'One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*', says Berger (1972: 47). In this photograph, the man looks at an image of a woman, while another woman looks but at nothing, apparently. Moreover, Pollock insists, the viewer of this photograph is pulled into complicity with these looks.

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

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

Such discussions of the compositional modality of the site of the image can produce persuasive accounts of a photograph's 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 theorize an image's effects. As I've already noted, some critics, often art historians, are concerned that many discussions of visual culture do not pay enough attention to the specificities of particular images. As a result they argue, visual images are reduced to nothing more than 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. 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) emphasize 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, Corbett 2005). Moreover, emerging from some critical quarters is a certain hesitation about full-on criticism of images' complicity with dominant ways of seeing class, 'race', gender, sexuality and so on. W.J.T. Mitchell (1996: 74), for example, has called this sort of work 'both easy and ineffectual' because it changes nothing of what it criticizes. Michael Ann Holly (in Cheetham, Holly and Moxey 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"' (Cheetham et al. 2005: 88).

What might this 'something in excess of research' be for which Holly yearns? All of these suspicions about the 'political' critique of images depend on claims that, in one way or another, visual materials have some sort of agency which exceeds, or is different from, the meanings brought to them by their producers and their viewers, including their visual culture critics. This is an interesting thread twisting its way through studies of visual culture, since

it suggests that culture – understood as cultural meanings and practices – may not be an adequate term to address fully all aspects of visualities. For if we agree that images can have their own effects, this is not always because they produce their own meanings. Rather it may also be because they do something unique to their visuality which is also something excessive to meaning itself (hence van Eck and Winter's [2005: 4] suggestion that it might not be possible to describe this effect in words). There are different understandings of this excess beyond the cultural, though. For van Eck and Winter (2005), as we have noted, it is the sensory and experiential nature of seeing (see also Mitchell 1996). For Ernst van Alphen (2005: 194–5), it is an image doing its own thinking, which presents problems to us on its own terms so that it becomes 'not only the object of fr[illegible]g – which, obviously, is also true and important – but it also functions, in turn, as a frame for cultural thought'. For Alfred Gell (1998: 6), it is about the way that art objects (specifically) are 'a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it'. For now, though, it is enough to note that there are a range of ways in which visual culture theorists have conceptualized the workings of the site of the image itself; subsequent chapters will develop their methodological implications.

4.3 the site of audiencing

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

audiencing

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. The notion of ways of seeing assumes just this. So too does Pollock when she claims that the Doisneau image is always seen as a joke against the woman, because the organization of looks by the photograph coincides with, and reiterates, a scopic regime that allows only men to look. It is important, I think, to consider very carefully the organization of the image, because that does have an effect on the spectator who sees it. There is no doubt, I think, that the Doisneau photograph pulls the viewer into a complicity with the man and his furtive look. But that does not necessarily mean the spectator sympathizes with

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

The *social* is thus perhaps the most important modality for understanding the audiencing of images. In part this is a question of the different social practices which structure the [illegible]ng 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 exam[illegible] 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're looking at it often (I hope – although this work on audiences suggests you may well not be bothering to do that) and looking at in different ways depending on the issues I'm raising. You would be doing this photograph very differently if you had been sent it in the format of a postcard (and many of Doisneau's photographs have been reproduced as greetings cards, postcards and posters). Maybe you would merely have glanced at it before reading the message on its reverse far more avidly; if the card had been sent by a lover, maybe you would see it as some sort of comment on your relationship ... and so on.

There is actually surprisingly little discussion of these sorts of topics 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 also an important and relevant body of work in anthropology that treats visual images as objects, often as commodities, and sees what effects they have when such objects are gifted, traded or sold in different contexts. Chapters 9 and 10 of this book will explore these two approaches to the site of audiencing in more detail. As we will see, especially in Chapter 9, these approaches can rely on research methods that pay little attention 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. They thus tend, like those studies which privilege the social modality of the site of production of imagery, to use methods that do not 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 9 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 criticizes: 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 were 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, what they really really want. And a third development might have been the fashionability in Britain of what was called 'lesbian chic'. Now of course, it would take a serious study (using some of the methods I will explore in this book) to sustain any of these suggestions, but I offer them here, tentatively, as an example of how an image can be read differently by different audiences: in this case, by different genders and at two slightly different historical moments.

There are, then, two aspects of the social modality of audiencing: the social practices of spectating and the social identities of the spectators. Some work, however, has drawn these two aspects of audiencing together to argue that only certain sorts of people do certain sorts of images in particular ways. Sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel (1991), for example, have undertaken large-scale surveys of the visitors to art galleries, and have argued that the dominant way of visiting art galleries – walking around quietly from painting to painting, appreciating the particular qualities of each one, contemplating them in quiet awe – is a practice associated with middle-class visitors to galleries. As they say, 'museum visiting increases very strongly with increasing level of education, and is almost exclusively the domain of the cultivated classes' (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991: 14). They are quite clear that this is not because those who are not middle-class are incapable of appreciating art. Bourdieu and Darbel (1991: 39) say that, 'considered as symbolic goods, works of art only exist for those who have the means of appropriating them, that is, of deciphering them'. To appreciate works of art you need to be able to understand, or to decipher, their style – otherwise they will mean little to you. And it is only the middle classes who have been educated to be competent in that deciphering. Thus they suggest, rather, that those who are not middle-class are not taught to appreciate art; that although the curators of galleries and the 'cultivated classes' would deny it, they have learnt what to do in galleries and they are not sharing their lessons with anyone else. Art galleries therefore exclude certain groups of people. Indeed, in other work Bourdieu (1984) goes further and suggests that competence in such techniques of appreciation actually defines an individual as middle-class. In order to be properly middle-class, one must know how to appreciate art, and how to perform that appreciation appropriately (no popcorn please).

The Doisneau photograph is an interesting example here again. Many reproductions of his photographs 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 tricksy, 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 Chapters 9 and 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.

5 summary

Visual imagery is never innocent; it is always constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledges. A critical approach to visual images is therefore needed: one that thinks about the agency of the image, considers the social practices and effects of its viewing, and reflects on the specificity of that viewing by various audiences including the academic critic. The meanings of an image or set of images are made at three sites – the sites of production, the image itself and its audiencing – 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.

With these general points in mind, the next chapter explains some different ways to use this book.

Further reading

Stuart Hall in his essay 'The work of representation' (1997b) offers a very clear discussion of recent debates about culture, representation and power. A useful collection of some of the key texts that have contributed towards the field of visual culture has been put together by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall as *Visual Culture: The Reader* (1999). Sturken and Cartwright's *Practices of Looking* (2001) is an excellent overview of both theoretical approaches to visual culture, and of many of its empirical manifestations in the affluent world today.