

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Gillian Rose**, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. Third edition. London: Sage, 2012. 386 pp. \$51.00 paperback (978-0-85702-888-4)

I begin with the suggestion that Rose's book addresses slightly different topics than it claims to. Rather than an overview of visual methods *per se*, the book consists primarily of eight essays that analyze how some topics have been studied visually, and in some instances, how visual methods have been constructed to do so. Discussion of topic and method are generally paired. For example "compositional interpretation" is applied to fine arts paintings and films (and video games, less convincingly); visual content analysis is applied to the study of *National Geographic* magazine photographs; semiology (semiotics) is almost entirely devoted to the study of advertising; psychoanalysis to the study of sexual difference in film. The pairing continues with "discourse analysis I," which combines documentary or historical images with other forms of data, but it breaks down "discourse analysis II," which is a study of institutionalization of visibility rather than the study of visual methods *per se*. Rose's chapter on "audience studies and beyond" reviews the long tradition of television audience studies before turning to new studies, including ethnographies of family photo worlds, mass media viewing, and other forms of viewing in society. Finally, her chapter on "visual research methods" attempts to review all research in which researchers make rather than find images in thirty brief pages. The schema is presented as a table on page 45, and is easier to grasp in that form.

From this perspective the book is an interesting inquiry into ways of seeing, with commentary on what visual methods work for each topic, rather than a text on methods. For example, at the end of her chapter on Discourse Analysis II she writes, "there are no methodologically explicit deployments of discourse analysis II that I know of" (p. 259). Liberating the book from an attempt to place all chapters under the umbrella of methods would, in my view, allow for a fuller appreciation of what the book does accomplish. This is especially the case since she moves through visual ethnography and other visual field methods with such alarming alacrity.

Some especially noteworthy general themes include the idea that images should not and cannot be reduced to their causes or even constitu-

ent parts. There is always something greater; something in the gestalt of seeing that defies definition. The chapter on content analysis raises the interesting issue of how to code visual images, and the overview of visual semiotics questions assumptions that photos contain deep structures and messages. By using *social* semiotics to study the social landscapes of new Apple stores, Rose shows that semiotics may survive its disappearing subject matter of print advertising. In fact her attempt to analyze a recent ad for an Alfa Romeo automobile (p. 125) using the traditional Barthes-inspired approach, seems forced rather than illuminating.

The book draws upon a huge intellectual landscape, including Freud (scopophilia), Lacan, Foucault, Sekula, and Haraway, among others. Often the chapters are deconstructions and recontextualizations of the arguments of these giants, although the spirits of some of them might appear bemused to find themselves treated as “visual methodologists.”

Rose defines criteria for a “critical visual analysis” which are applied to each approach. These include an admonition to look carefully at images, to understand the social basis of their making, and to include an element of reflexivity, here defined as a dialogue on how the process of making data are part of those data themselves.

Interestingly enough, most of the approaches or methods covered do to not measure up to these criteria. For example, compositional analysis looks carefully at images but does not address social practices and reflexivity; content analysis also looks carefully at images but does not study the social practices of production and has nothing to do with reflexivity. Semiology studies the structure of images so, yes, the method is considered carefully, but again does not address social practices of production and is not reflexive, despite the author’s guarded suggestion to the contrary. Psychoanalysis offers a way to look at sexual difference, mostly in film, but does not study the social issues of production; nor is it generally accepted to be reflexive (though Rose again makes an interesting but unconvincing argument to the contrary). Discourse analysis I and II are useful introductions to Foucault and related theorists but have almost nothing to do with her critical criteria. Finally, she shifts the criteria in her discussion of visual research methods, so the steam from the argument seems spent by that time.

She also offers a framework that discusses the image itself, its “site of production,” and “audiencing,” although not all of the approaches or methods discussed in the book cover the three elements of the framework. Thus much energy in the text is spent fitting arguments into places where they feel rather uncomfortable.

Rose is a cultural geographer with extensive published research in family photography. Her orientation is toward cultural studies rather

than sociology; I counted fewer than 10 of the more than 500 references as from the journal *Visual Studies* (formally *Visual Sociology*), a common outlet for visual sociology, and very few citations from various visual anthropology journals, where visual methods are discussed in depth.

In fact, the only disappointing chapter is her review of methods associated with visual sociology primarily because it is impossible to cover an entire approach in a handful of pages. The only scholar treated in depth is sociologist Chuck Suchar, whose work on comparative gentrification is given careful attention. She creates the (perhaps unintentional) dismissive category of “visual essays” to include visual ethnography and other field studies using images. Her discussion of photo elicitation does not acknowledge the book-length studies employing the method, nor the extensive cross-disciplinary deployment of the method; further, photovoice is given but a few paragraphs in an aside. One could question whether it was a good idea to add this chapter (it does not appear in earlier editions); the quality and depth of the discussion is so different from the rest of the book. It is impossible to miss the implied message that these largely sociological contributions are of marginal importance.

Her voice is often witty and sharp. For example, when noting the deterministic underpinnings of semiotics, she quotes theorist Goldman, who argues that “the triumph of the commodity form is that we do not recognize its presence at all” to which she responds: “That statement immediately invites the question, ‘who is this “we”?’ ... does ‘we’ refer to the rest of us poor dupes who don’t know our Marx (and Goldman) well enough?” (p. 145). Her grasp of theory is impressive and she has a wonderful ability to make murky ideas clear, especially when discussing semiotics. I did wish that she had referenced sources in endnotes rather than embedding them in the sentences (one, I counted, had almost thirty!), to keep the ideas, often complex enough in their own right, more in the forefront.

Rose’s book is a minor masterpiece despite my sense that it is about slightly different topics than it claims to be. There is a great deal of posturing for students of the PowerPoint generation, but the announcements of chapter themes, chapter summaries, listing of key words and “focus” sections are, in fact, helpful. The book is beautifully printed, with nicely reproduced images in color and black and white. I recommend it for any sociologist interested in the visual, but not as the only text one should read on the topic. It might serve as a bridge between sociology and cultural studies, and for that alone it is valuable.

The book is suitable for advanced undergraduate courses in social theory and cultural studies. As a graduate text it would be helpful to

those writing dissertations and theses that explore study visual aspects of social life.

*Duquesne University*

Douglas Harper

**Douglas Harper** is Professor of Sociology at Duquesne University. He is author of five visual ethnographies published by the University of Chicago Press and several edited monographs. His most recent book is *Visual Sociology*, published in 2012 by Routledge. He is founding editor of the journal *Visual Studies*, and is President-Elect of the International Visual Sociology Association. His current work on public interpretations of fascist semiotics is forthcoming in Italian. He has lectured and taught workshops on visual sociology in universities in universities throughout the world.

[harperd@duq.edu](mailto:harperd@duq.edu)