

VISUAL CULTURE STUDIES

Research Methodologies in European Cultures and Societies

Session 21

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Cultural Studies

→ the textualization of cultural forms – the image as a consciously produced visual document, *with a deliberate purpose to communicate*, to interact with a public; reading involves identifying its particular language and conventions and contextualizing it

→ the picture as a visual discourse

The politics of visual representation

- John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1972):
 - *The forms of seeing the world are deeply cultural*
 - *Images – and imaging – encompass practices of power*
 - *Both image making and image reading are culturally situated practices*
 - *Changes in the concept of the visual and in image conventions produce changes in the ways of seeing the world*
- How conventions in nude painting defined the 'feminine'



Peter Lely,
Nell Gwynne, and the Duke of St Albans

N. Mirzoeff

- **The pictorial/visual turn:** an awareness of the need to go deeper into issues of visual representation – and search for alternative visualities:
- **“Visual culture does not depend on images, but on the modern tendency to illustrate or visualize existence”**
(Mirzoeff, 1998, 5)
- → Visual culture as a TACTIC: a **form of critical intervention on the everyday:** asks questions and raises issues about visual representations
(Mirzoeff [Michel de Certeau] 1998: 8, 11)

Visual culture studies

Visual studies critique tries to understand both individuals' and groups' responses to visual media and also how they use the visual **with an awareness of its particular qualities.**

Emphasis on the INTERACTION between the viewer and the image - **making meaning from images is an active and subjective practice focused not on the image but *on the viewer***

N. Mirzoeff

- VISUALITY = the discursive practices that produce authoritative meanings of the visual (*TRTL*, 3), the meanings we easily assign to familiar images (hegemonic images)
- COUNTERVISUALITY = the assertion of the right to look; challenging the law that sustains visuality's authority in order to justify instead the subject's own sense of what is 'right' (*TRTL*., 25). A practice of countervisuality suggests that the subject is claiming the autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable (*TRTL*, 1)

The Right to Look. A Counterhistory to Visuality.
Duke UP. 2011.

BLACK
SUPER SALE
FRIDAY
SALE 70%-80%

November 25, 2016: A 24 hour moratorium on consumer spending

**BUY
NOTHING
DAY**



Participate by not participating

Barbara Kruger (1945-)

- Visual artist
 - Designer
 - Photographer
 - Painter
 - Conceptual artist
 - Academic
 - Artist (association with the so-called *guerilla* semiotics)
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- FEMINIST CRITIC
 - Mass communication techniques, language & images





MoMA, NY, 2022 "Thinking of You. I Mean Me. I Mean You."

- <https://www.icaboston.org/multimedia/barbara-kruger-part-of-the-discourse-art21-extended-play/>

Discourse analysis and visual analysis: an experiment

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- Apply tools of visual discourse analysis as proposed in **the theory of visual grammar** by linguistic critics Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen
 - to pin down the strategies Barbara Kruger uses in maneuvering the technologies of visibility in place to challenge the visualities and how she uses LANGUAGE in particular as one of those tools
 - Her work on the notion of the gaze, which is central to the critical work her images develop, and how that entails the possibility of **a position for the female viewer as a subject.**
 - to scrutinize how these processes work as strategies to produce meaning: the ways the “**visual syntax**” of the image articulates with its “**semantic dimension**” (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 45)

‘COMPOSITE TEXTS’

- Kress and van Leeuwen propose **a grammar applied to images:**
- the relation between images, meanings, and meaning-making strategies
- emphasize the deep articulation between the aesthetic and the semiotic
- See how different technologies can bring composition techniques to create relations between representation and reference that break the naturalized relations of identity between them.

Kruger’s collages at hand are originally large-scale images that *combine, or bring into interaction*, different semiotic codes; namely, text, image, and graphic elements.

They form what Kress and Van Leeuwen call ‘composite texts’.

Visual grammar theory

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- Starting-point? - Kruger's collages are analytical: mainly representational (vs.interactive)
 - resort to a human figure, deemed the 'carrier', whose 'possessive attributes' (his or her characteristics) the viewer is able to identify
 - when the carrier looks at the viewer, we presence 'the gaze' – creates interaction: this look from the picture onto the viewer establishes a connection
 - Kruger's art intensifies these references: it calls the viewer into doubt and directly involves him/her/them in the reading of the image
 - the gaze therefore turns from a typically objectifying tool to an agency-laden device that empowers both the carrier and the viewer.

(Kress and Van Leeuwen change the terminology later to "demand pictures").

The gaze - & countervisuality

In how far does the sharing/mirroring of the gaze in Mulvey's work allow the viewer to engage actively with what he/she/they is seeing?

And gain awareness about the different dimensions of seeing?

And of his/her/their own responsibility in the act of seeing?

And create conditions for imagining alternative visualities?

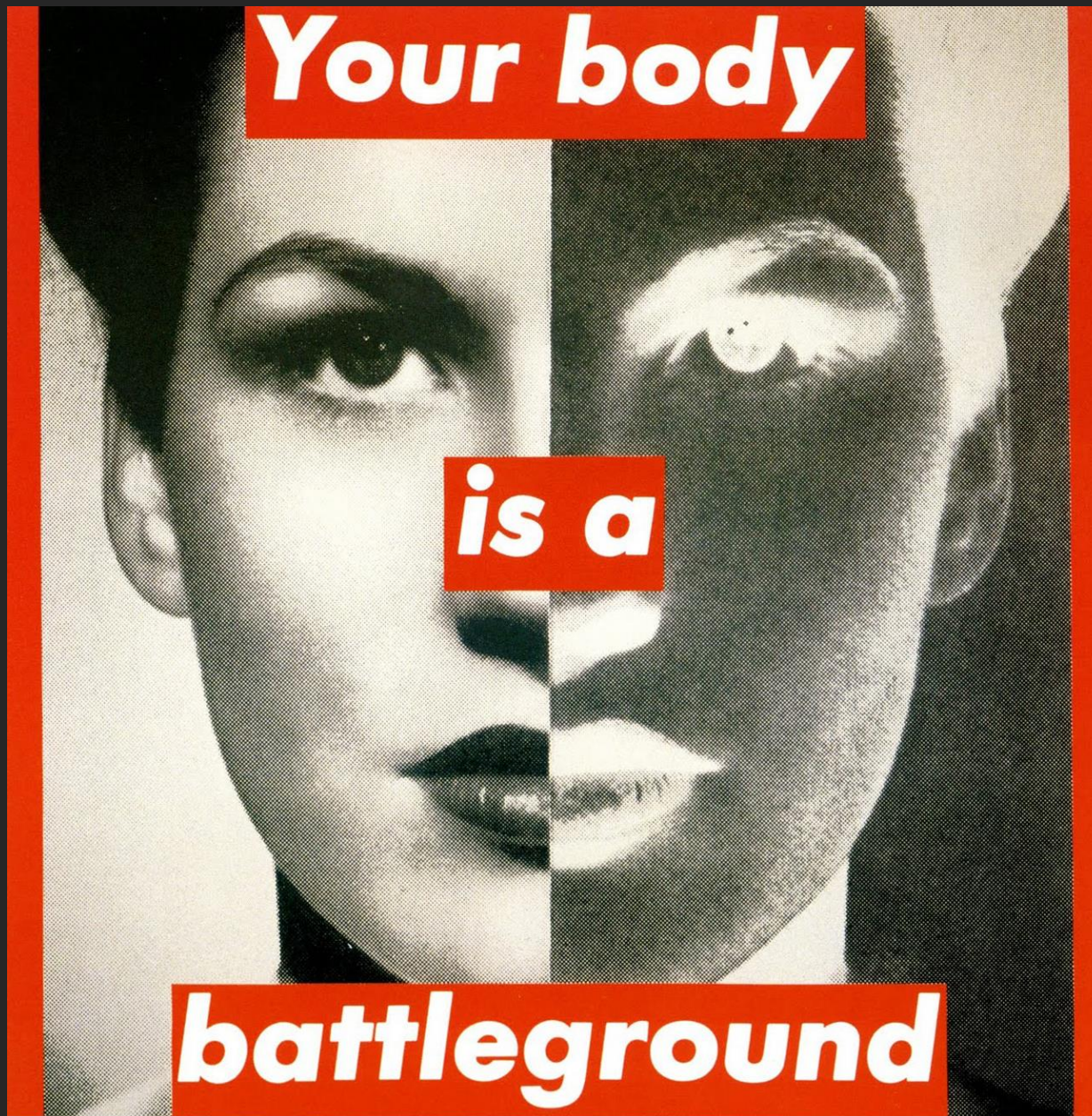
1.



"Untitled (I Shop Therefore I Am)"

(1987)

2.



"Untitled (Your body is a battleground)"

1989

Additional bibliography

- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin, 1972.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. 1972. Transl. A. M. Sheridan Smith. Routledge, 2008.
- Kress, G. and Theo van Leeuwen. *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design*. Routledge, 2006.
- Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look. A Counterhistory to Visuality*. Duke UP. 2011.
- Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18. – CHECK for later critique, also by Mulvey