Visual Culture Studies

Research Methodologies in European Cultures and Societies
Session 1 – 29-10-2026
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(Foto: Kena Betancur/Getty Images, 2014)

Cultural Studies in brief

- 1960s: the structuralist paradigm exhausted – new dialogues between disciplines, awareness of the compexity of objects of study – and a common interest emerges:

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CULTURE

the concept evolves as an INTERDISCURSIVE SPACE, a complex category that could bring together and make fruitful the dialogue betweeen Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines, generating interdisciplinary research methodologies

- **The Birmingham School for Contemporary Cultural Studies** (1964-2002): new technologies and CLASS take centerstage – ***working class culture – popular culture a*nd the impact of *mass culture – a strong critique of the canon***

Raymond Williams
What is culture? – a new concept of culture

- Culture designates “a whole way of life”
- Culture “is ordinary” (vs elitism and high culture)

- Culture is simultaneously generic and specific, colletive and individual, material (Anthropology) and symbolic (History & Literary Studies):

→ culture is a collective network of meanings that guides individual action and is, in turn, constantly modified by individual and collective action – a political phenomenon, involving POWER relations

DIFFERENCE

Ien Ang - Cultural Studies theorist, Western Sydney University

Issues in the debate on DIFFERENCE

- DIFFERENCE as a category beyond just cultural difference

- revokes hierarchies placing the Other always in a relation of inferiority to the Self

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- Vs. The OTHER as a focus, bearing a positive value in itself

The recognition and affirmation of difference:

- the politics of difference (social movements)

vs. multiculturalism as policy (a bureaucratic view that aims at controlling diversity to fit into the unity of the nation-state)

- Contests the view of incomensurability that posits difference as division

- Proposes **difference as a common culture (R. Williams), a common humanity (humanist universalism), 'conviviality' (Paul Gilroy)**

Contributions of literary studies to the critical study of culture:

A hermeneutical approach in line with the **textualization of objects**: issues of language, e.g. polissemics, ambiguity, ideology, resistance

- **'close reading'** as analytical technique: dismantling narratives and meanings

- The aesthetic dimension of the object recovers its historical dimension: **historicization** is a must (the text is **both a product of and an active participant in history**)

REPRESENTATION

- “Culture is not so much a set of things – novels or paintings or TV programmes and comics – as a process, a set of practices [anthropological understanding]. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of **meanings** – ‘the giving and taking of meaning’ – between the members of a society and a group.”

(Hall, Stuart ed. *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices.)*

Meaning and representation (S. Hall)

"The main point is that meaning does not inhere *in* things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is the result of a signifying practice – a practice that produces meaning, that *makes things mean"* (Hall 1997, 24).

Two main systems for the apprehension of the world:

the senses (e.g. looking) and language

→ In the connection between word and the concept lies MEANING. The *process* which connects the three elements is REPRESENTATION

The look
(French existentialism & postcolonial critique)

- To look
- To be looked SELF/OTHER

VISIBILITY / INVISIBILITY

- Domination v. subjugation
- Reification v. recognition

- To LOOK BACK (F. Fanon) – recovery of AGENCY
- The visibility of the racialized BODY

Feminism, etc.

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 Gwinne, and the Duke of St Albans

‘Showing seeing’

• Vision is learnt and cultivated, not just given by nature; that is, vision has a history. (Mitchell, 2002, 232)

•This history involves from art history to the particular venues where images circulate and their conventions, and habits of spectatorship, for instance.

→ The look as mediator of the act of looking **– how do you learn how to look**?

Visual culture

VISUAL STUDIES:
Seeing should be understood as the point of intersection between what we know, what we perceive and what we feel, using all of our senses. In opposition to the traditional visual perspective which was based on one sense, seeing is a collective way of seeing, visualizing and imagining. (Mirzoeff, 2017)

Focal point: how do the social processes of the image and the look (production, circulation and reception/consumption) guide the meanings atributed to them by the observer/viewer?

- images are socially produced
- images are forms of REPRESENTATION
- ways of seeing are also socially produced
- The modes and conventions, as the circuits, also define the object

N. Mirzoeff

- **The pictorial/visual turn:** an awareness of the need to go deeper into issues of visual representation:

- **"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)

Dialectics subject – visual object –> the 'visual event'
The image is perceived as a vehice that generatetes an essentially **subjetive practice** (information / meaning / pleasure) which is not focused on the object in itself but in the **subjet who sees or gives meaning and also in the forms of mediation**, as **socially and historically constructed objects themselves** (Mirzoeff 1998, 3)

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.**

Reading an image - Barthes

- *Mythologies* (2012; 1957)
- The naturalization of images as mythification (ass. ideology)

- *Camera Lucida* (1981; 1980)
  - **How do we read a photograph?**
  - **How much attention do we pay to the photo?**
  - **Do we watch or look at it in sequence?**
  - **Do we just glance at it, thoughtlessly?**
  - **Or do we do a 'close-up'?**
  - **Do we avoid any detail?**
  - **How do we feel interpelated by the visual rendering?**

Reading an image with Roland Barthes:

→ from a DENOTATIVE (general) reading (***STUDIUM***) to a CONOTATIVE (detailled) reading (***PUNCTUM***):

the detail 'pricks' the observer/reader:

"A photograph's punctum is that accident which **pricks** me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)"

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(relates to the interference of subjetivity, creativity, memory)

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The DESCONSTRUCTION of the image leads to a *critical commentary* that is attentive to DETAIL

E. g. a visual 'close reading' technique combines:

- the perception of the image as a social construction (context/intention/reception) w/
- the desconstruction and interpretation of the image (ideology/creativity)

Vocabulary

- Perspective
- The look / the gaze
- Composition
- Foreground / Background
- Definition of the image
- Movement
- Detail
- Blindspots
- …
- …

N. Mirzoeff

- VISUALITY = the discursive practices that produce authoritative meanings of the visual (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' (25). A practice of countervisuality suggests that the subject is claiming the autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable (*T*1)

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

Apply the concepts and techniques to **photographs** — example:

Mirzoeff identifies diverse ‘fluxes of visibility’ in the *circulation of* images associated to the Black Lives Matter movement:

- **testimony**
- **protest materials**
- **sharing** (from social media to the dominant media)

→ ‘Citizen journalism’, ‘semiotic ativism’, ‘artivism’ – all describe ways of dealing with visual culture that aim at intervening in reality

→ visual studies as a tactic (a counter-visuality)



(Jonathan Bachman/Reuters 2016)

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