VISUAL
METHODOLOGIES

An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials

5TH EDITION

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book systematically discusses and evaluates a wide range of methods for doing research with visual materials. It is addressed to the undergraduate student who has either found some intriguing visual materials to work with, or who wants to make some to work with, or who is excited by scholarship on some aspect of visual culture and wants to do an empirical research project that engages with some of its arguments. So most of the chapters focus on a specific method for analysing visual materials as part of research projects.

However, the title of this book is visual *methodologies*, not visual methods. This is important. A research *method* is a series of practical steps that produce particular kinds of data, evidence and results. A *methodology* is more comprehensive. Methodology refers to the rationale for those practical steps; it is the justification for the research method you use. (And research design – the subject of Chapter 5 – refers to the integration of the methodology with the overall conceptualisation of the research.) Why are you researching your particular topic in the way that you are? What sorts of data and evidence are important and why? What would constitute robust results?

So this book does not start with actual methods: they appear in detail in the book's third part. Instead, the book starts with a survey of the concepts and debates about visual images which have flourished over the last four or five decades (though some have been around for very much longer). If you're going to research with visual materials, you need to have some understanding of what they are and how seeing them works so that you understand what sort of thing you are dealing with. In fact, this book has four parts. The first

discusses concepts about visuality and visual materials; the second looks at aspects of research design that are particularly pertinent to researching with visual materials; the third part then discusses different methods; and the fourth explores how visual materials can be used to share the results of research. The book also has a companion website.

Each of the chapters on a specific method in the third part uses a key example to demonstrate how that particular method works and what it assumes. These key examples are mostly published studies that offer sustained analyses of particular visual materials. Sometimes they are classics in the field – Chapter 9's key example is a book about advertisements which was first published in 1978, for example – and sometimes they are more recent. Each of these key examples is supplemented with other studies of the same kind of images using the same method. Each chapter also suggests how the same method can be used on other kinds of visual materials, and some briefly mention other related methods.

Some readers may want to read this book from the first part to the last, evaluating all the literatures and methods and issues it discusses, carefully assessing my arguments, and reaching their own decision about which method best suits their purposes. I'm sure many authors dream of such thorough and attentive readers; however, authors are also readers themselves, and we know that there is another, and probably far more common approach to books: reading them selectively. If you are a selective reader, that might be because you are already familiar with debates about visual culture; or because you have already found some images you want to work with, and you want to know what is the best method to work on them with; or simply because you're short of time.

To help all readers make most effective use of the book, this chapter is divided into five sections:

1. The first describes in a little more detail what each part of the book does.
2. The second comments on how I have chosen to present the discussions in each part and chapter – the book depends on what I call a *critical visual methodology* to structure its discussion.
3. The third gives some more guidance on reading the book selectively, by type of visual material or by research method.
4. The fourth section explains the structure of each chapter.
5. And the fifth says why you need to read more than just this book as part of your visual research project.

1.1 The Four Parts of this Book

I Contexts

The first part gives an overview of different theoretical approaches to understanding visual culture. These theoretical debates are diverse and Chapter 2 surveys them briefly. To give some consistency to the book's subsequent discussions, at the end of Chapter 2 I develop some explicit criteria which then structure how the book discusses each method, which are the criteria for what I call a *critical visual methodology*. Chapter 3 then examines what those debates argue are the most important aspects of images and their effects in more detail. I call these *sites* and *modalities*. The four sites that I identify are:

1. The site of the production of an image.
2. The site of the image itself, its visual content.
3. How and where images circulate.
4. Their interpretation by different audiences and users.

What I call 'modalities' are the different aspects of a site that are most significant in producing an image's effects. The three modalities I emphasise are:

1. Technological: the material qualities of an image.
2. Compositional: the visual organisation of an image.
3. Social: an image's relation to social identities, practices and institutions.

Chapter 3 elaborates these sites and modalities at some length.

II Design

The second part of the book begins to move towards the more practical aspects of doing a research project – though the first of these is intimately connected to some of the conceptual debates discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. This first discussion is about research ethics. Ethics in research is about the conduct of the researcher. It concerns their own integrity and the sort of relations they establish with what they are researching, whether people or objects. Chapter 4 discusses some of the ethical issues involved in doing research with visual materials specifically. These are essential to consider whatever kind of images you are working with in your research project. This part of the book also discusses some aspects of how to design a research project that uses visual materials. And it has some practical advice about locating images to research and about referencing the visual materials you work with.

III Methods

The third part of the book turns to a range of research methods that conceptualise, source and analyse visual materials in different ways. Chapters 7 to 12 and 15 all focus on methods that work with *found* images: that is, images that already exist, and that you can explore as part of some sort of research project. Chapters 13 and 14 focus in more detail on another approach to researching with visual images, which is those methods that involve *making* visual images as a way of answering a research question. All these chapters focus in detail on some particularly revealing examples of a method's application, which are the chapter's key examples.

IV Engagement

The fourth part of the book explores how to use visual images to engage non-academic audiences with the findings of a research project. It mentions a variety of ways that this can be done – exhibitions, films, data visualisations, visual essays and interactive documentaries, for example – but pays more attention to the principles of designing effective visuals for engaging audiences. Digital technologies have made making these sorts of things much easier (and cheaper) then ever before, and online platforms – whether a personal website or platform like Vimeo – makes them more accessible to more people than ever before (in theory at least). So some researchers are using these sorts of visual materials to try to reach new audiences in new ways, and Chapter 15 discusses some of the issues that these efforts raise, if they are understood in relation to critical visual methodologies.

1.2 Introducing the Book's Approach: A Critical Visual Methodology

This book does not offer a neutral account of the methods available for interpreting visual materials. As a visual researcher myself, I have my own methodological preferences and they shape how this book is written. My own approach is to understand visual images as embedded in the social world (Rose, 2000, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2022; Rose and Tolia-Kelly, 2012). They are produced, pictured and circulated as part of social identities, processes and institutions; and they have meaningful and affective effects as different things are done with them, including how they are seen.

So I agree with the scholars who argue that the interpretation of visual images must address the social contexts of images. That context is ridden with different kinds of power relations, which images can affirm or contest in many

different ways. That is why I develop a *critical* visual methodology. By 'critical' I mean an approach that thinks about the visual in terms of the power relations that produce, are articulated through, and can be challenged by different ways of seeing and imaging. Chapter 2 outlines three criteria for a critical visual methodology, which then provide the means by which the various methods in this book are evaluated. Using them, for each method I ask, how useful is it in achieving a critical methodology for visual images?

This has further implications for the way in which I subsequently assess the various methods the book discusses. For example, while quantitative methods can be deployed in relation to these sorts of issues (as Chapter 8 will suggest), nonetheless the emphasis on meaning, significance and affect in Chapter 2's overview suggests that qualitative methods are more appropriate for critical visual methodologies. Indeed, every chapter here but two explore a qualitative method.

1.3 How to Use this Book Selectively

1.3.1 Using this book selectively on the basis of wanting to make images as part of your research

In recent years, many social scientists have made visual images as part of research projects. Many of these methods are now well established, including photo-elicitation interviews, participatory arts-based research, and photovoice. If you know you want to use one of those methods, you can go straight to Chapters 13 and 14. If you are thinking of making images to share the results of your research, head to Chapter 15.

1.3.2 Using this book selectively on the basis of having found some images

You may want to read this book selectively because you have found some images that you want to explore, or you have a question about some aspect of contemporary or historical ways of seeing that you want to try to answer. In which case, you might find it most helpful to begin by looking at the method that has been used most often in relation to the material you have.

Many of the methods discussed in this book tend to have been used more with some sorts of images than others. Semiology, for example, has often been used in relation to advertisements printed in magazines and pasted on billboards; audience studies emerged focusing almost entirely on the audiencing of television programmes; elicitation interviews are usually conducted using photographs. Several of the chapters in this book discuss key examples that use one sort of image to

discuss the method. However, each chapter also mentions other sorts of images and how they might be approached using the same method.

Even when there are persuasive precedents for applying a method to one sort of visual material rather than another, though, it is important to think carefully before deciding that you too will apply the same method to the same sorts of materials. It may be that approaching the same visual images from a different methodological direction will yield much more interesting results. Each of the chapters points out in its opening section what other methods have been applied to the sorts of visual materials explored in its main examples.

Bearing those caveats in mind, Table 1.1 lists the methods discussed in this book and the sorts of images to which they have been most often applied. If you already have some images you want to work with, find them (or something like them) in this list, see what methods have been used to interpret them, and start with the chapters on those methods. Again, that doesn't mean you have to use those methods, but they will most likely provide a starting point for thinking methodologically.

Table 1.1 A summary of the methods and the key visual materials discussed in each chapter.

chapter	visual materials	method
Chapter 7	fine art paintings (and films, computer games and smartphone apps)	compositional interpretation
Chapter 8	any sort of image but in large numbers: in this chapter, magazine photographs and covers, film stills and Instagram photographs	content analysis / cultural analytics
Chapter 9	advertising (and built spaces)	semiology / social semiotics
Chapter 10	a wide range of image types that visualise a similar topic, including book illustrations, maps, engravings, photographs, fine art paintings and cartoons	discourse analysis I
Chapter 11	institutions that display visual images and objects, for example museums and art galleries	discourse analysis II
Chapter 12	television audiences and smartphone app users	ethnography / interviews
Chapter 13	photography – as well as collage, maps and drawing – made by participants in research projects	elicitation interviews / participatory visual methods
	visual materials made by researchers as research data	photo-documentation / visual essays
Chapter 14	digital images hosted on social media platforms, including tweets and Instagram photos	digital methods

It is obvious from Table 1.1 that there are many sorts of visual objects that this book does not examine. There are no sustained discussions of maps, film posters, graphic novels, drone footage, medical imaging or diagrams, for example. Again, this can only serve as encouragement to sever any assumed link between a method and an image type. A method should be used for its interpretive possibilities, regardless of the visual materials it analyses.

1.3.3 Reading this book selectively on the basis of sites and modalities

If you are reading this book on this basis, you have already done enough preparatory reading to have a sense of which site(s) of visuality you are interested in, whether that is the production of image, the image itself, its circulation or its audiences/users, and you want to know which methods are most appropriate for focusing on it.

Almost all the methods discussed here focus on some sites and modalities and not others. There are very few studies of visual culture that attempt to examine all the sites and modalities; most are driven by their theoretical logics to concentrate on one site in particular. Some of those that do examine more than one site suffer (I think) from a certain analytical incoherence; others, like some of the in-depth ethnographies mentioned in Chapter 12, are analytically coherent but many researchers lack the time or resources to pursue all sites and modalities. Thus, for both practical and theoretical reasons, engaging with the debates in visual culture means deciding which site and which modalities you think are most important in explaining the effect of an image.

Table 1.2 is an attempt to suggest which of the various methods discussed in this book focus most directly on which sites and modalities. The table format implies that some methods sit neatly at the intersection of just one site and modality. In reality this is rarely the case, as the discussions in each chapter here will make clear. However, the Table does serve as a starting point for identifying the method that may be most appropriate for the site or modality you are most interested in on the diagram. You can then turn to the relevant chapter.

Again, it is important to emphasise that you do not have to slavishly follow the method indicated in Table 1.2. For example, if you are interested in the site of audiencing in its social modality, the obvious methodological route would be to use either interviews or ethnography (or both). However, they are not the only productive methodologies that might be deployed; Charles Goodwin (2001), for example, uses ethnomethodology (a method not discussed in this book) to produce a very fine-grained account of how looking is structured in highly skilled ways by people in their everyday interactions. Nonetheless, beginning with the

sort of method most commonly used with the materials you are interested in will at least give you a starting point for thinking about what method might work best for you.

Table 1.2 The sites, modalities and methods for interpreting found visual materials.

site \ modality	technological	compositional	social
production	ethnography	compositional analysis content analysis cultural analytics semiology digital methods	ethnography discourse analysis II
the image itself	compositional analysis digital methods	compositional analysis content analysis cultural analytics semiology digital methods	social semiotics discourse analysis I ethnography
circulation	ethnography digital methods	compositional analysis	ethnography
audiences and users	ethnography interviews	ethnography interviews	ethnography interviews

Some readers will notice that some well-established visual methods do not appear in Table 1.2, and are therefore not discussed in any detail in this book. Some chapters briefly mention other related methods, however, and identify useful guides to their deployment. Table 1.3 lists them. (The chapter on psychoanalytic methods of interpreting films which appeared in previous editions of this book can now be found on the book's companion website.)

Table 1.3 Related visual research methods.

the app walkthrough method	section 7.2
multimodal analysis	section 9.4
analysing video of naturally-occuring action	sections 9.4 and 13.2.1
framing analysis	section 10.2.2
iconography	section 10.3.1
Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis	
visual ethnography	section 12.3
arts-based research	sections 12.4.1 and 13.2.2
drawing as a research tool	section 13.2.2
photovoice	section 13.2.2
digital storytelling	section 13.4
psychoanalytic interpretation	section 13.4
	companion website

1.4 How the Methods Chapters are Organised

Each chapter on a specific method shares a similar structure:

- The very beginning of each chapter tells you what *key example* is discussed by the chapter and lists the main *sites and modalities* that it pays most attention to, as well as noting the *key types of visual materials* discussed in the chapter. It also lists the method's *key terms*.
- The chapter proper then opens with a more or less brief introduction to the method and its theoretical context.
- The *theoretical context* is then elaborated in more detail.
- The *method* is described – particular aspects of some methods are given special attention in some chapters, for example locating images, or reflexivity.
- Throughout each chapter, there are boxes that ask you to *focus* on trying out specific parts of the method and boxes that *discuss* some of the method's complexities. *Key terms* – both conceptual and technical – are highlighted in bold.
- Some chapters point you to *related methods*.
- Each chapter's final section is an *assessment* of its method's strengths and weaknesses in relation to the critical visual methodology developed in Chapter 2.
- Then there is a *summary* which lists what sorts of visual materials the method is most often applied to, the sites and modalities it addresses most directly, the method's key terms, its strengths and weaknesses as I have assessed them.
- And finally, there are some suggestions for *further reading* about the method the chapter discusses, and a description of the further resources to be found on the book's companion website.

1.5 Why You Should Read More Than Just This Book

If you want to interpret visual materials successfully, there are at least two other sorts of reading you need to be doing.

First, you will have to engage with the theoretical arguments underpinning the method you eventually choose. This book is about methodology, remember, not just methods. Methods do not work in isolation; they depend on understandings of how visual meaning is made, and you will need to appreciate those understandings in order to make the method work well. That means doing some conceptual groundwork.

Second, all of these methods require some sorts of contextual knowledge about the imagery you are interested in. It is always important to know something about all aspects of the image you want to research; even if the audience is your main analytical focus, it is often useful to know something about the production of the image too. So before you use any of the methods the following chapters discuss, do some broad reading about the images you intend to study.

1.6 Two Final Remarks

To conclude this introduction to the book, I want to say just two more things, both about the limits to the ability of any research method to interpret images.

First, I do not think that there is some essential truth lurking in each image, awaiting discovery by the most correct, most critical visual methodology (although we will encounter the latter claim in some of the chapters of this book). I agree with Stuart Hall when he says:

> It is worth emphasising that there is no single or 'correct' answer to the question, 'What does this image mean?' or 'What is this ad saying?' Since there is no law which can guarantee that things will have 'one, true meaning', or that meanings won't change over time, work in this area is bound to be interpretative - a debate between, not who is 'right' and who is 'wrong', but between equally plausible, though sometimes competing and contesting, meanings and interpretations. The best way to 'settle' such contested readings is to look again at the concrete example and try to justify one's 'reading' in detail in relation to the actual practices and forms of signification used, and what meanings they seem to you to be producing. (Hall 1997a: 9)

Interpreting images is just that, interpretation. The aim of this book is to give you some explicit ways to conduct and justify your 'reading' of an image.

Second, while this book offers some guidelines for investigating the meanings and effects of visual images, the most exciting, startling and perceptive critics

of visual images don't, in the end, depend entirely on their sound methodology, I think. They also depend on the pleasure, thrills, fascination, wonder, fear or revulsion of the person looking at the images and then writing about them. Successful interpretation depends on a passionate engagement with what you see. Use your methodology to discipline your passion, not to deaden it.

Further Reading

- The second edition of *The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods,* edited by Luc Pauwels and Dawn Mannay (2020) is a comprehensive resource that covers a very wide range of visual methods, as well as discussing other aspects of visual research methods such as ethics and copyright. There are also the four reference volumes edited by Jason Hughes (2012) as *SAGE Visual Methods.*
- *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods: Application, Reflection and Ethics* by Dawn Mannay (2016) is a good overview of working with images created by participants in a research project.
- *Visual Research Methods: Image, Society, and Representation* by Gregory Stanczak (2007) and the second edition of *Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research* by Marcus Banks (2012) remain useful introductions for working with found images, as are Penny Tinkler's *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research* (2012) and Stephen Spencer's *Visual Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (2011).
- *Refiguring Techniques in Digital Visual Research* edited by Edgar Gómez Cruz, Shanti Sumartojo and Sarah Pink (2017) is an interesting overview of how digital technologies are offering new challenges and opportunities for visual research methods.