VISUAL METHODOLOGIES
The previous chapter’s discussion of what could constitute a critical visual methodology might have seemed rather abstract. However, it plays a key role in this book, because it provides the criteria with which I will assess the strengths and weaknesses of the methods this book examines. Each of the following chapters discusses one method, or variations of one method (apart from Chapter 11, which discusses several different methods), and they do so by examining some particularly revealing examples of its application which are each chapter’s ‘key examples’. But how, you may be wondering, do you start to work out which of these methods is best suited to your particular research concerns? In other words, how are you going to make use of this book?

This chapter does some practical work in helping you explore methodologies for working with visual materials in six sections:

1. the first shows you how to read this book on the basis of the sites and modalities you are interested in;
2. the second shows you how to read it on the basis of the visual materials you are interested in;
3. the third explains how this book works in relation to other books on visual culture;
4. the fourth describes the structure of each chapter;
5. then there is a brief discussion about finding your images;
6. and finally, an even shorter note on referencing and reproducing your images.

I imagine that the users of this book might be of two broad types: those that approach it comprehensively, and those that approach it selectively.

Some readers may want to read this book from beginning to end, evaluating all the methods it discusses, carefully assessing my arguments, and reaching their own decision about which method best suits their purposes. You are my ‘comprehensive readers’. 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 already have a
sense of what your analytical approach to visual culture is and, therefore, which sites and modalities you want to investigate. Or, you might be a selective reader 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. The next two sections suggest how each of you might best use this book.

Whichever kind of reader you are, though, you should read Chapter 12 on the ethics of visual research. Although explicit discussions of research ethics happen more often in the social sciences than the humanities, the ethics of sourcing and reproducing visual materials is something that all researchers working with such materials should pay attention to.

3.1 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, or its audiencing, and you want to know which methods are most appropriate for focusing on it. After all, if you think that the audience is the most important site at which the meaning of an image is made, and that the social is that site’s most important modality (these are theoretical choices), there is no point inadvertently choosing a method that focuses mostly on the production processes or the technologies of the image you are concerned with.

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 outlined in the previous chapter in equal depth; 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, as I suggest in Chapter 5; others, like some of the in-depth ethnographies mentioned in Chapter 10, are analytically coherent but researchers rarely have the time, resources or inclination 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.

Figure 3.1 is an attempt to suggest which of the various methods discussed in this book focus most directly on which sites and modalities. Locate the site/modality you are most interested in on the diagram, and see what methods it suggests are most appropriate. You can then turn to the appropriate chapter.

It is important to realise, though, that you do not then have to slavishly follow the method indicated in Figure 3.1. For example, if you are interested
in the site of audiencing in its social modality, the obvious methodological route would be to follow audience studies and use a combination of interviews and ethnography. 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.

3.2 Reading this Book Selectively on the Basis of Having Found Some Images

On the other hand, 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 applied more to some sorts of images than others. Sometimes there is a fairly obvious, if not always watertight, reason for this. For example, the anthropological approach to images as visual objects mentioned in Chapter 10 has looked more at photographs and fine artworks than at other kinds of visual materials. This is for two reasons, I think. One is that these scholars found much of their theoretical inspiration in anthropological theories of exchange, and hence are very interested in the mobility of visual objects; and certain sorts of photos and artworks are obviously objects that can and do travel particularly easily and often. A second reason is that this work has a strong interest in the impact of colonialism on patterns and processes of exchange, and anthropological photographs and the trade in so-called ‘primitive’ or indigenous art are excellent examples with which to work towards a postcolonial reading of visual culture. Other examples of particular methods being deployed in relation to specific sorts of visual materials are less easy to understand, however. For example, audience studies, also discussed in Chapter 10, have focused almost entirely on the audiencing of television programmes and videos. Why? Chapter 10 offers one or two reasons, but none of them is completely satisfying. I can not see any compelling reason that explains why television should have dominated audience studies to the extent that it has; indeed, examining the interpretive work done by audiences of films or glossy magazines or museum exhibits would seem to be just as valid, given the theoretical arguments underpinning audience studies.

Even when there do seem to be good reasons why a method is applied 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.

And of course, there are a number of digital visual materials that have had very little attention paid to them. YouTube, for example, has only just begun to be studied from a critical visual studies standpoint; how devices like Blackberries and iPhones are involved in specific practices of audiencing is not clear; Wiis have been given little serious attention; and there are very few studies that follow a particular image as it travels through different modes of transmission. Digital new media offer rich pickings for methodological invention.
Bearing those caveats in mind, Table 3.1 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.

It is obvious from Table 3.1 that, to repeat a point made in the Preface, there are many sorts of visual objects that this book does not examine. Again, this can only serve as encouragement to sever any automatic link between a method and an image. A method should be used for its interpretive possibilities, not because of conventional ways of using it.

### 3.3 Why You Should Also Read Books Other Than this One

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. Methods do not work in isolation; they depend on understandings of how meaning is made, and you will need to appreciate those understandings in order to make the method work well.

Secondly, there is another sort of preparation that is needed, regardless of theoretical starting point, methodological implications or visual materials. 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 utilise any of the methods the following chapters discuss, look at the bibliographies at the end of the book to help you find some background material, and use the other resources at your disposal too: libraries, databases, reading lists and so on. Search for what others have written on the medium in which you are interested and on the genres you think are relevant to the images you are concerned with. If you have an ‘artist’ of some kind as the producer of your images, look for what has been written on him or her.

To get you started, each chapter here concludes with some recommended extra reading about the method discussed; and at the end of the book there are lists of reading about specific kinds of visual materials.

3.4 How Each Chapter Works

In terms of using this book, each chapter shares a similar structure:

- the very beginning of each chapter tells you what key examples are discussed by the chapter;
- 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 specific parts of the method, and key terms – both conceptual and technical – are highlighted in bold;
- 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 1;
- then there is a summary box 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.

The repetition of this structure for each method will make the book easy to use, I hope.

There is also a list of all the key terms used throughout the book situated at its very end.
3.5 A Quick Word on Finding Your Images

If you have not already found the images with which you want to research, the possibilities are endless. There are contemporary exhibitions, galleries, magazines, cinemas, TV shows, videos and web pages; there are historical archives and museums. The books listed in the bibliographies at the end of this book may also provide some ideas. If you find just one image that intrigues you, that’s a good start. You can find more related images by searching for published work on the artist who made that first image, or on the genre to which it belongs. If it is an historical image, contact its owners, and make use of archivists; they are almost always extremely helpful and knowledgeable. To track down specific images, there is the *Picture Researcher’s Handbook* (Evans and Evans 2006).

There are also many image banks on the Internet now, including Google Images – which searches for images on web pages – and many sites devoted to archiving images specifically, including both commercial sites like Getty Images and non-commercial ones like the British Film Institute’s Online Archive or the Smithsonian Institute’s site. All these sites offer huge numbers of still and moving images; but remember, for a research project you need to think carefully about exactly how you want to use the images you can find on these sites. Some of these websites show you images designed to be shown on websites. In this case, you are looking at a version of the image in the medium it was designed for; and you will probably want to think more about that medium as part of your analysis. However, many websites show you digital versions of images that were made for a different medium. A Google Images search will retrieve images made specifically for web-pages, but also a lot of images that appear on webpages but were originally made for somewhere else. For example, it will show you paintings that appear on museum or art gallery websites, and analogue films and photographs that have been digitised in order to appear on web-based archives.

If you use an online image bank and your study is not about images on the web, but rather about, say, sixteenth century Dutch genre paintings or 1940s Hollywood film noir, you need to think about how you are using these image banks. Images change as they move across media; looking at a painting, or watching a film, is not the same on a computer screen as in a church or a cinema, as Chapter 1 and 2 both pointed out. In that case, it might be better to use these websites as starting points for locating images that you then look at in detail elsewhere. It might be that Movieclips.com is very helpful as a way of finding out what films are useful for your study, but it might not be the place you decide you actually want to watch them (especially as it offers only clips); you might
well decide you should watch the whole films on DVD, or try to find a cinema that is screening them instead. Similarly, if you are interested in sixteenth century Dutch genre paintings, Google Images will show you loads, but you should use that as a starting point to then find out more about the artists and the images, including going to see some of the paintings that Google Images shows you if you can. Chapters 5 and 8 discuss more of the pros and cons of using online databases to source visual materials.

3.6 Another Quick Word, on Referencing and Reproducing Your Images

Once you have found your images, there are a number of considerations to bear in mind in relation to their eventual use in your essay or dissertation. First, you need to be able to reference them in as clear a manner as you would reference any other source material. That is, you need to record as much of the following sort of information as possible. For a painting, for example, you will need the name and date of the artist who made the image, the title of the piece, the date of its creation, the materials from which it is made, its dimensions, its condition, its current location and its accession number (if it is now in a collection). For an advertisement in a magazine, perhaps you would need the name, date, volume number and place of publication of the magazine, plus the number of the page on which the advert appeared and its size; or, if you know about the whole campaign of which this advert is a part, you need to make systematic reference to the different parts of that campaign. For a website, you need its address and the date you accessed it.

Secondly, you need to consider the precise format in which you will interpret your images. In particular, how much material beyond the image itself will you need? Surrounding text can make a big difference to a picture’s interpretation. The Doisneau photograph discussed in Chapter 1, for example, has been give three different titles by the various books it has been reproduced in: ‘A Sidelong Glance’, ‘Painting by Wagner in the window of the Galerie Romi, Rue de Seine, Paris 6e, 1948’, ‘An Oblique Look’. Each encourages a rather different interpretation. Other aspects of an image’s format are important too. If you are studying a painting, is it important that you see the original, or is a reproduction good enough? Should you be concerned with its original site of display, or is seeing it in a gallery adequate? If it’s an advertisement, how important is it to know what was printed next to it in a magazine? Some of these concerns depend, again, on what theoretical position you are adopting. Knowing
where an advert appeared in a magazine would be more important if you
were using discourse analysis (Chapter 8), for example, than if you were
using compositional interpretation (Chapter 4) or content analysis
(Chapter 5). However, they can be crucial regardless of your particular
method.

When you come to write up your research, you should also consider
the relation between your own text and the images you have been work-
ing with. It is always important to show the reader what you are discuss-
ing. But do you want to use the images simply to illustrate your argument?
Do you want to try to convey something of their own agency? Do you
want them to make their own arguments, by making a photo-essay for
example? In Ways of Seeing, John Berger (1972) offers essays consisting
entirely of images; you might feel that some of the things you want to say
about your images are better shown as a photo-essay. Chapter 11 dis-
cusses this as a method in some detail. Or you could annotate your
images with text and other images as John Berger (1972) also does (see
Figure 1.2 in Chapter 1).

Finally, it is always useful to bear in mind how you might reproduce
the images you are researching. Don’t crop or otherwise tamper with
the reproduction without making your intervention clear to your reader
(if you have cut an image down to show a small part of it, say it’s a
‘detail’ of the work). Colour photocopying remains an excellent way
to reproduce published images for essays (even black and white photo-
graphs are better copied this way because the various shades of grey
are much better preserved). Scanning printed images into digital for-
mat, or using images downloaded from the web, is also very useful:
digital images can easily be cropped if necessary and inserted into writ-
ten text. If you have the skills, you may even want to consider produc-
ing your work as a website or in CD or DVD format: Samantha Warren
(2002) suggests, rightly, that these digital formats permit much higher
standards of visual reproduction than do printed social science jour-
nals, and of course they also allow you to integrate moving images into
your work.

If these sorts of reproductions are for private research purposes only,
there is usually no problem with copyright. However, if you think you
might publish your work, or distribute it in some way – by putting up a
website, for example – then you are legally obliged to obtain permission
from its copyright holders to reproduce it. Chapter 11 has more on copy-
right, and Rosemary Eakins and Elizabeth Loving (1985: 8–15) have a
guide to pictures and the law. Reproduction for publication often entails
paying a fee to the copyright holders too, and you will need your sources
clearly recorded to do this.

And now, on to the nitty-gritty of interpreting visual materials.
On the companion website

The website has links to a large number of other websites that carry images. Some of these are general search engines. Others are image banks and archives of various kinds. The website divides the latter into those that carry still images, and those that carry moving images. Websites that carry both appear in both listings.