

Seeing Beyond Belief: Cultural Studies as an Approach to Analysing the Visual

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The relationship between what we see and what we know is never settled. (Berger, 1972:7)

INTRODUCTION

Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies centres on the study of the forms and practices of culture (not only its texts and artefacts), their relationships to social groups and the power relations between those groups as they are constructed and mediated by forms of culture. The 'culture' in question is not confined to art or high culture. Culture is taken to include everyday symbolic and expressive practices, both those that take place as we live (and are not aimed at producing artefacts), such as shopping, travelling or being a football supporter, and 'textual practices' in the sense that some kind of material artefact or representation, image, performance, display, space, writing or narrative is produced. (...)

The focus of such studies is normally on contemporary and emergent practices, studied within their formative historical contexts. These are mainly those of the late eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the 'modern' period of industrialization, the formation of the nation-state, the rise of the type of the modern individual, imperialism and colonialism, and the commodification of culture. Such contexts are now importantly extended to include globalization and the range of shifts which are gathered up under the terms 'post-modern' and 'post-colonial', as the legacies and cultural forms of the earlier period are seen to be radically restructured and fragmenting at the end of the twentieth century. (...)

Instead, Cultural Studies insists upon the constitutive role of culture in sustaining and changing the power relations enacted around issues of gender, sexuality, social class, race and ethnicity, colonialism and its legacies, and the geopolitics of space and place within globalization. It examines these in terms of the ways of seeing, imagining, classifying, narrating, and other ways of investing meaning in the world of experience, that cultural forms and practices provide.

Cultural Studies: methodologies

(...) Therefore, it is hard to identify for Cultural and Media Studies its own singular and strict set of disciplinary protocols. However, and while differences of emphasis exist, most research methodology courses within Cultural and Media Studies include elements of ethnographic, sociological, semiotic, psychoanalytic and critical textual methods. (...)

4 HANDBOOK OF VISUAL ANALYSIS

To sum up we offer a check-list of the main features of the analysis which follows. These will be restated as more focused questions within the analysis itself.

- 1 We are interested in an image's social life and its history.
- 2 We look at images within the cycle of production, circulation and consumption through which their meanings are accumulated and transformed.
- 3 We pay attention to an image's specific material properties (its 'artificialness'), and to the 'medium' and the technologies through which it is realized (here, as photographs).
- 4 While recognizing the material properties of images, we see these as intertwined with the active social process of 'looking' and the historically specific forms of 'visuality' in which this takes place.
- 5 We understand images as representations, the outcomes of the process of attaching ideas to and giving meaning to our experience of the world. With care and qualification, much can be gained by thinking of this process as a language-like activity - conventional systems which, in the manner of codes, convey meaning within a sign using community.
- 6 We temper point 5 with the recognition that our interest in images and other visual experiences (and, indeed, lived and material cultural forms) cannot be reduced to the question of 'meaning' and the intellectual processes involved in

coding and decoding. As human beings, and as the members of a culture, we also have a sensuous, pleasure-seeking interest in looking at and feeling 'the world' including the media that we have put in it.

- 7 We recognize that 'looking' is always embodied and undertaken by someone with an identity. In this sense, there is no neutral looking. An image's or thing's significance is finally its significance for some-body and some-one. However, as points 1 to 6 indicate, this cannot be any old significance, a matter of complete relativism.

ANALYSIS

Context of viewing

We need first to ask where the image is. What is its location (or locations) in the social and physical world? Our answer to this question will tell us much about how we meet or encounter the image; that is, how we attend to it. Is it, for instance, met in the public or private part of our lives? Is it something on which we can concentrate and be absorbed by in a single-minded way or is it one contingent element amongst others in our busy daily transactions, in our leisure time or as part of our work or education? Did we deliberately seek out the image, in a library or a gallery? The context influences how we look at the image through constructing certain expectations. For instance, the gallery adds an aura of seriousness of intellectual or aesthetic intent to the picture.

Second, why is the viewer looking at the photograph? What information or pleasures do they seek? How are they intending to use the image? Is their interest idle or purposeful? If the look is purposeful, as in, for instance, studying the images with which we have chosen to illustrate this chapter, then it is important to know what editorial judgements have been made and how this has influenced the selection. Writing this chapter, and in particular choosing images (which will be reproduced several thousand times within copies of this book) and then discussing them in certain ways, is a small exercise of power. What are our reasons, our interests or purposes, in selecting the images we have? What view of the traffic in images are we promoting? Uppermost in our minds has been the exemplification of the methodological points we wish to make. Not all images would serve as well to do this although, in principle, if the concepts and methods we use are of value then they should be applicable to a wide range of images. However, here we have favoured 'strong' examples of the concepts that we are dealing with, in order to help elucidate points.²

The image (Figure 4.1) of the 'redneck' in a Marlboro cigarette advertisement is situated on a super-site hoarding. This is positioned to the side of a roundabout on a major ring road in a large provincial city. The photograph of the image was difficult to take because the hoarding is hardly accessible on foot. It is positioned within a major road complex where no provision is made for pedestrians (they are actively discouraged) and is clearly intended to be seen by passing motorists or motorists in the frequently slow-moving traffic that is typical of this main approach to the city during peak commuting hours. The same image was also reproduced in glossy magazines and the magazine sections of major Sunday newspapers. Literally, then, a photographic original



Figure 4.1 Marlboro cigarette advert, circa 1995.

-also a digitally manipulated image (see Henning, 1995:217)-has been translated into two kinds of print of vastly different scales. We can reasonably speculate that one may be seen through the frame of a car window while on the move, while the other could be draped across the lap of a reader or browser while reclining on a sofa or travelling on a train. Alternatively, it might be read at a desk when the reader takes a break from the work they otherwise do there. In this sense the images are located, both in the physical world and in our everyday social worlds, quite differently.

Taking two of these scenarios further, we can begin to say something about how the one image is experienced in different contexts. In the case of the car driver or passenger (this itself may be an important distinction), the image is experienced in time or as the spectator travels in space. It will loom up to confront the spectator and then recede from their field of vision. Their encounter with the image will not be the result of an intention to look at it; it presents itself to them. The image - as a publicly sited hoarding - will be seen in the context of the (sub)urban environment: the intersection of motorways stretching away from the viewer, the backs of working-class housing behind it, the sound of traffic passing in other directions, the smell of traffic on hot (or wet) tarmac, and so on. The image is not a passive element in this scene. It depicts a man (who looks in the same direction as the viewer) who is himself beside a major road looking on at an American-style truck. There are hills in the background as there are in the actual location in which the image is sited. What is depicted in the image echoes or resonates with the situation of the driver/passenger/reader of the image.

On the sofa, another viewer looks at the image in their domestic space. They have sat down, positioned themselves, chosen the magazine in which the image is printed,



Figure 4.2 Robert Doisneau, 'An oblique glance', 1948/9.

opened it and alighted on the image. They may, in the first instance, have chosen and bought the magazine in which the advert appears. They hold the image and focus on it. In a different sense from the first example, they too experience the image in time, or more precisely, within a sequence of images and written words offered by the other contents of the magazine. They might consume the magazine in a linear fashion working their way through from beginning to end, or more selectively, working back and forth through its pages, in effect producing their own juxtapositions between its various features and advertisements. We can ask more questions of this situation. Is the magazine, and for some moments the advert, their sole object of attention? Is the television on? What is being broadcast? How does it, at some level of consciousness, interact with the image? Might it be a programme about some other aspects of life in the United States? A 'road movie'? Perhaps music is playing - the image may have a soundtrack. Perhaps the 'reader' is not alone but looks at the magazine with a friend or partner; they discuss, judge, joke and elaborate via anecdotes and connections on the image.

Our second chosen example (Figure 4.2) is an older photojournalistic image, one which still, on first encounter, may raise a smile. 'An oblique glance', by French

photographer Robert Doisneau, which shows a couple looking into the window of a Parisian antique shop, has been reproduced in books and exhibitions about Doisneau, the photographer, as well as being referenced in a number of discussions of French humanist photography shown in major international exhibitions on documentary or on post-war French photography. The image was first published in *Point de Vue* (photo-magazine).

In contrast to the Marlboro advert, the contemporary viewer is likely to encounter this image within the context of the work of the particular photographer, or as an example within a more general discussion of reportage photography of the period. The photograph may be reproduced in a book, or, indeed, the viewer may be pursuing historical research concerned with photojournalism, with Doisneau or with French humanist photography. Whilst the reader of *Point de Vue* in 1949 may have come across the image in circumstances equivalent to our putative sofa reader of the Marlboro advert (perhaps whilst listening to the radio), contemporary viewers of this image may approach it rather differently. On the one hand, Doisneau's work has been extensively recycled as posters and postcards, and is familiar to many who would not necessarily know the provenance of the image or the name of the photographer. On the other hand, precisely because the work is now acclaimed as exemplary of its genre and era, many viewers are likely to have in some way sought out the circumstances of viewing, whether borrowing or buying a book, or visiting an exhibition. (The same is true of the work of Robert Mapplethorpe which we discuss below.)

The photograph has a title, which indicates to the viewer its primary humorous focus, and it is specifically authored. The naming of the photographer lends status to the image as a work of art and, indeed, the context of viewing may be a gallery exhibition within which the image is hung as a fine print, perhaps as one in a series of similarly carefully reproduced photographs. We are generally familiar with the convention of the gallery, with the ritual of progressing from image to image, attending to each one for a short space of time, then, perhaps, starting to make comparisons between one image and another in terms of subject-matter and in terms of aesthetic form. Like the Marlboro adverts, the experience of the encounter is inter-discursive in the sense that situation, contemporary references and resonances inform our experience, whether we merely glance at the image or study it more intently. Questions of social history also obtain. For example, whilst viewers, both in the 1950s and now, may see the Doisneau photograph as offering information about Paris after the war (for instance, the clothing worn by the boys across the street and the style of dress of the couple), this information inevitably holds differing implications for those considering the picture some fifty years later.

Context of production

Our next question is: how did the image get there? This question shifts our attention from how we encounter the image to ones about its production by others and its distribution - to the intentions and motives of others, and the institutional and other social contexts, imperatives and constraints in which they work.

Here the contrast between the Doisneau photograph and the Marlboro advertisement is instructive. Most obviously, the first was produced as a narrative image, as photojournalism, whilst the other was constructed as an advertisement. Also the manner of production differs. Doisneau's photograph is about an event which has not been specifically directed by him - although the setting up of his camera inside the shop with the painting of the naked woman placed at an angle in the window, orchestrated the possibility of responses from passers by. His conceptual approach is in line with Henri Cartier-Bresson's famous definition of photography as 'the simultaneous recognition in a fraction of a second of a significance of an event as well as of a precise organisation of forms which give an event its proper expression' (Cartier-Bresson, 1952). For the photographer the skill is one of recognizing the 'decisive moment', both when taking the image and in the process of selection and editing. Here it is clear that photography was not seen as somehow inherently objective but, rather, reportage was used by photographers as an opportunity for interpretative commentary. The point was to find 'telling' photos, or 'photo-novels', sequences of images for publication in illustrated magazines such as *Life* (USA), *Vu* (France) and *Picture Post* (Britain), which were popular and widely distributed from the 1930s to the 1950s. Whilst his work was more along the lines of social observation than 'hard' news, that is the reporting of major contemporary events, a sense of 'news values' will have informed the decision to shoot this series of images from within the shop.³

Doisneau made this image at a time which predates television as the primary conveyor of visual information and was informed by pre-war documentary film and photo movements. By the 1930s in France, there was an established 'humanist' focus upon ordinary people and everyday life which took as its subject-matter people at work and at leisure, depicted in streets, cafes and brothels, or at special events such as fetes. Doisneau described Paris as a theatre of images: 'It doesn't matter where you look, there's *always* something going on. All you need to do is wait, and look for long enough until the curtain deigns to go up' (in Hamilton, 1995:182).

In our example, Doisneau has set himself up in the shop in order to observe events; he has constructed a scenario within which it is likely that interesting events may occur. By contrast, advertising imagery is overtly directorial, constructed purposefully in line with a particular brief and taking specific account of the intended means of communication (hoarding, magazine advertisement, etc.). The photographer for the Marlboro advert is not named; there is no attribution of authorship. Unlike photojournalism, the dictates are entirely commercial. In advertising the photographer or art director are named only if they are famous enough for their name to condone the product.⁴

The Marlboro image is an advertisement for cigarettes and will have been designed and produced for that company by a specialist advertising agency as part of the Philip Morris company's wider marketing and advertising strategies. This advert belongs to a whole series for Marlboro cigarettes which, in part, are a response to the early 1990s ban on advertising cigarettes on British television and the anticipation that this ban will be extended to all forms of advertising. This accounts for the way that the advert (and the others in its series) contains no written or explicit reference to

either cigarettes or the Marlboro brand. Ironically, the clear reference to smoking cigarettes which connects the image to the product is given in the government health warning which runs along the bottom of the image.

The producers of these Marlboro ads have to solve a problem, that of how to reference a brand of cigarettes and how to promote a product that is widely understood to be seriously dangerous to health. In the 1970s and 1980s Marlboro advertising associated the cigarettes with the figure of the 'cowboy', itself a vehicle for making a connection between cigarettes, white masculinity, 'loner' subjectivity and the untamed nature of the mythological American West. At that time it was possible to include the brand name and copy which recommended smoking (Marlboro cigarettes in particular) as natural, pure and relaxing within the advert. More recent government restrictions on such practices have led designers and producers of the adverts to use other strategies. They know that the distinctive red colour of the Marlboro packet and logo can live on after the packet or name itself ceases to be shown. A significant red detail, 'the sunburnt neck, a light on top of a police car, a traffic light', appear in the more recent images as the only coloured elements in what look like black and white stills from art-house movies. Furthermore, the producers use stills which reference movies which critically rework the myth of the West: *Bagdad Café*, *Paris, Texas* and *Gas, Food, Lodging* (Henning, 1995:223-8). These postmodern reworkings of Western mythology also allow the advertisers to shift the connotations of smoking from the natural and relaxing toward the dangerous and the 'romance of living on the edge' (Henning, 1995).

This advertising image is then a deliberate and skilful response to legal constraints and shifts in the culture of health on the part of producers whose task it is to maintain markets for their client's product. The features of the image which we have discussed here are not arbitrary but the result of a complex interaction. This is between the profit-making demands of capitalist economics, the restrictions imposed by anti-smoking campaigners, health professionals and the law, as well as factors such as the modes of organization, division of labour and work processes which obtain at any specific advertising agency and the knowing semiotic practices of advertising 'creatives'. In our example, the image takes its form from, and depends for its success as an 'advertisement' on, such factors. Producers employ particular strategies, which will not be the only solutions that could have been adopted, but they are outcomes of intention and 'producerly' knowledge and skill. Whether we, as receivers or consumers of the image, directly take or accept the meanings they have intended to give the image is another question (see Chapter 8).

LOOKING: FORM AND MEANING

We can note that at this point in our analysis we still have not begun to deal with what we may call the image 'itself' or 'in-itself'. This actually raises some difficult and vexed questions about the boundaries of an image or a 'text'. What is the image in itself? What are the inherent properties of a text when considered apart from individual acts of looking at it and making sense of it?

Conventions

Two uses of the concept of a convention, understood as a socially agreed way of doing something, one with literary and art historical roots, the other sociological, play a part in the visual analysis of photographs. We start our discussion of codes and conventions with an example from art history. This is useful as a way of recognizing that traditions of analysis employed by these specialists in studying the narrow range of images which makes up the history of art have always offered Cultural Studies something, especially the study of iconology and iconography (Panofsky, 1955; see also van Leeuwen, Chapter 5 in this volume). While it is probably true to say that, in Cultural and Media Studies, these methodological branches of art history and theory have always been overshadowed by the use of semiotic methods imported initially through Continental structuralism, we give them some time here. This is because they immediately offer ways of talking about pictures in terms of the key concept of 'convention'. They also allow us to start from noticing things about images rather than about written language and then seeking to apply linguistic concepts to images.

Pictorial conventions

The art historian Michael Baxandall offers a brief but exceptionally clear analysis of the pictorial conventions simultaneously employed in a fifteenth-century woodcut shown in Figure 4.3:

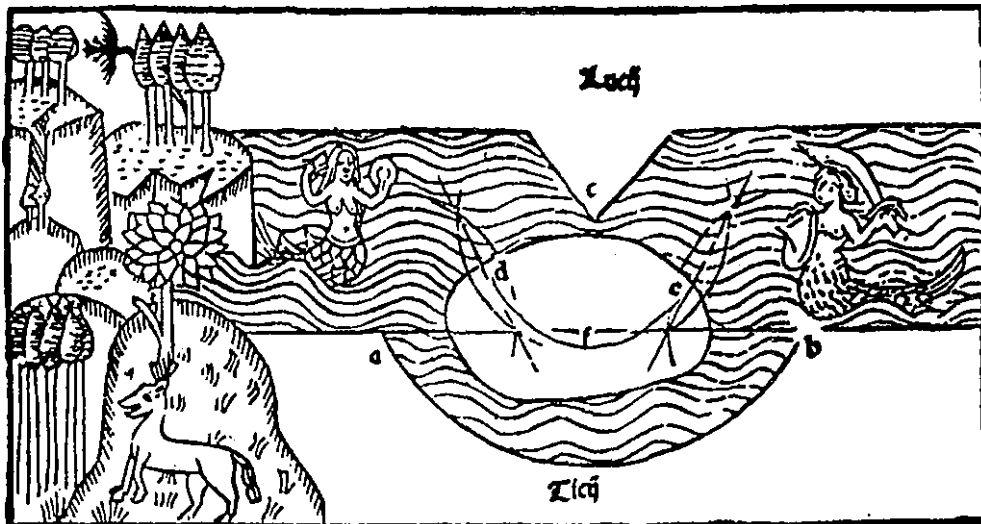


Figure 4.3 De Fluminibus. Woodcut, 1483.

[Plate 15] is the representation of a river and at least two distinct representational conventions are being used in it. The mermaids and the miniature landscape on the

left are represented by lines indicating the contours of forms, and the point of view is from a slightly upward angle. The course of the river and the dynamics of its flow are registered diagrammatically and geometrically, and the point of view is from vertically above. A linear ripple convention on the water surface mediates between one style of representation and the other. The first convention is more immediately related to what we see, where the second is more abstract and conceptualised - and to us now rather unfamiliar - but they both involve a skill and a willingness to interpret marks on paper as representations simplifying an aspect of reality within accepted rules: we do not see a tree as a white plane surface circumscribed by black lines. (Baxandall, 1988: 32)

A number of points are worth drawing out of this paragraph. First, Baxandall talks about 'marks on paper' and the ways they are signs for flowing water, (imagined) bodies and land. He draws attention to a material surface and what it carries as the ground (literally and metaphorically) of a pictorial representation. He is aware of the materiality of the image that he analyses. This is important because a medium like a woodcut clearly offers different signifying resources than, say, an oil painting or a photograph.

Second, he sees the meaning of these marks on a surface (that is, flowing water) as dependent on interpretative skill and, even prior to that, a willingness or interest on the part of the viewer to interpret them. So he sees that the image implies something about its viewer and her or his competence in looking.

Third, he notes that several kinds of marks are doing different work within the one image: some are diagrammatic and others are 'more immediately related to what we see' (Baxandall, 1988:32). (Lines, for example, are used to indicate or describe the edges of human forms. Of course, no such lines are to be found at the edge of our limbs but certain situations do arise when we perceive a contrast between a limb and a lighter or darker surface against which it is seen, the drawn line acts as a conventional equivalent for this contrast.) He sees these different kinds of marks as lying on a spectrum of possibilities which runs from the less to the more abstract. They all simplify reality and they are all subject (for the sense they make) to accepted rules, rules which may or may not be familiar to us given our membership of a historically or culturally specific sign community.

Semiotics and codes

Baxandall's description of these pictorial conventions comes close to the semiotic notion of an iconic sign, in which the signifier (the physical mark or material thing/object/quality) bears some kind of resemblance to what it signifies (what it means or stands for). It also approaches, at the more abstract end of his spectrum, the semiotic premise that many kinds of sign are 'arbitrary'; that is their meaning is not directly dependent upon some intrinsic qualities that they have. Rather, within a culture, a certain kind of mark has been matched (and agreed by all who can understand the convention, the language, or the code, that it is so matched) with a certain kind of object or quality of objects in the real world.

Semiotics proposes that there are whole ranges of visual, material, pictorial and symbolic signs which are conventional in the way that Baxandall identifies, for

example in bodily movement and gesture, in the camera work, narrative devices and editing of film and television, in the weight, spacing and shapes of typographic forms. In this way the concept of a convention is extended to that of a 'code' - an extended system of signs which operates like a language (itself a code of uttered sounds or printed marks) (see Chapter 9).

There have been many attempts (within Cultural and Media Studies and elsewhere) to analyse images using elaborate and systematic semiotic theories of codes or of signification (the operation of signs) based upon the paradigm of language. Over repeated attempts, often under the sway of changing intellectual fashions (structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstructionism), it has become clear that a too rigid application of systematic methodologies for visual analysis, which take written or spoken language as a model, is self-defeating. There is always a tendency in such attempts to miss the specificity of the medium, and the practices built around it in social use, where signification actually takes place. Hence, in a good example of the (sometimes very productive) tensions inherent in Cultural Studies which were remarked upon at the beginning of this chapter, the application of de-coding methodologies or the practice of textual analysis are often challenged by insisting on the need to stress the negotiated, dialogic and sometimes resistant and subversive dimensions of human communication. In fact, it is this stress on the plural, messy, contested and even creative nature of our discourse with the visual and with images, the manner in which this is a site of a struggle over what something means, which often makes the Cultural Studies analyst wary of the very term 'communication', preferring instead 'representation' or 'mediation'.

Photographic conventions

Convention and meaning enter into the business of making photographs at the most basic technical level. Indeed, it has been pointed out that meaning is even encoded in the design of the apparatus of photography. Very different examples of this are provided by, for example, Snyder and Allen (1982) and Slater (1991). The very existence of the rectangular frame of the camera viewfinder and its picture plane was designed into cameras at an early stage in the history of photography. The round lens of a camera creates a circular image which shades off into obscurity at its circumference. Some two hundred years before the first successful chemical fixing of the camera image, 'the portable camera obscura of the early nineteenth century was fitted with a square or rectangular ground glass which showed only the central part of the image made by the lens' (Snyder and Allen, 1982: 68-9). This, as they point out, was the outcome of adjusting the camera image to meet the requirements of 'traditional art', the rectangular easel painting. This is a good example of the way in which a convention exists while its historical origins are forgotten. In considering the snapshot cameras of the mid-twentieth century, Don Slater (1991) sees that the small icons that help the snapshotter set the camera's focal length for a particular kind of subject matter - a portrait, a family group, a landscape - already anticipate the conventions by which such genres are recognized and need to be produced. We will start our own hunt for photographic



Figure 4.4 Robert Mapplethorpe. 'Portrait of Clifton', 1981.

conventions a little further on in the process, in the basic decisions that a photographer takes as she or he deploys their equipment (see Chapters 3 and 9).

First, however, we need to take care not to be misunderstood, as in what follows it could appear that we are imputing too much explicit intellectual effort to the photographer as they mobilize conventions. As for the fifteenth-century woodcut printer and his 'audience', conventions exist which are both used by photographers and understood by contemporary viewers of photographs. This is not to say that photographers consciously choose the conventions that they will use in making a picture. Some may of course, but we are not making the ludicrous suggestion that they hold seminars on semiotics in order to carry out a commission (although it may be worth remarking how close creative directors in advertising, whose job includes briefing photographers, come to doing this). In general, the use of conventions by photographers is a matter of assimilated 'know-how', a trained sense of 'this is how to do it' gained 'on the job' and by observing what does and does not 'work' in concrete

situations. Similarly, in looking at a photograph and finding meaning in it, we do not need to refer to a dictionary of conventions - we don't look them up. Unlike the woodcutter's 'now unfamiliar' diagrammatic representation of a river flowing, photographic conventions are very familiar to most of us: they fall below the threshold of conscious attention. They are nevertheless there.

It is the very degree to which sets of conventions have been assimilated, within a culture, as the way to do something, that guarantees their very naturalness rather than their evident conventionality. With regard to photographs in particular, the fact that they are also produced through mechanical and chemical processes tends to persuade us that they are not the outcome of skill in handling a 'language' but are automatic, and immediate, traces or reflections of what they depict (see Chapters 7 and 9).

The portrait by Robert Mapplethorpe in Figure 4.4 could seem to be without convention. Both its extreme simplicity (not much scope for artifice, arrangement or choice here) and its impact (a startled gaze which startles the viewer) is surely the result of something more like spontaneity or passion than a rule-governed activity or 'a socially agreed way of doing something'. In fact, within its simplicity, there is a considerable complexity of conventional devices and by identifying them we can go a long way toward accounting for some of its drama. The conventional operations that we would draw attention to are the following: framing, gaze, lighting, context, camera position.

First, the frame (itself, as we saw above, a device which has dropped well below visibility as the convention that it is): consider how tight it is set around the man's face. It excludes any signifying context except that of the deep black background. Anything that might locate, pin down, domesticate, classify, or otherwise offer us clues as to who this person is or what he does, is ruled out.

Second, the gaze: the man looks directly at us, wide eyed. In fact, what he looks at directly is the camera. Mapplethorpe has not had him look away to right or left, up or down, not even slightly. It is in looking at the camera that he appears to be looking at us. This is a convention known to portrait painters (who used linear perspective and ways of highlighting the eye, rather than a camera to achieve this) and film-makers who (except in special circumstances) strictly avoid the convention in order not to break the illusion that we are looking in on another world without ourselves being seen.

Third, the camera position places us completely on a level with the man. We are, in terms of frame, gaze and camera position 'face to face'. Strictly speaking it is us in our Viewing position' (not our real location in the world) who are face to face with a man depicted in this way (which, of course, may not be how we would see his face, wherever it is, in the real world, at work, in a shop, a nightclub, whatever) (see Chapter 7).

Do we not also feel physically close to him? All of the conventional factors that we have been considering so far contribute to this sense of physical proximity. His head fills our field of vision as it is represented by the photograph and 'he' arrestingly answers, locks on, as it were, to our gaze. Lastly, the dark background and the arranged lighting of the head may contribute to this sense of proximity.

Here is a case of signification arising from the image's materiality. We can see the dark background as either measureless depth or flat surface, the material surface

of the picture itself. Seen in reproduction in this book we will tend to 'see through' the page to the image of an image - a poorly reproduced photograph. Seen as a framed 'fine print' in a photographic gallery we would be aware of the texture, lustre and grain of the black areas of the photograph as a material surface - as 'stuff' rather than depicted space. Two other factors that we have already met are at work here: the location of the image and the way we attend to it or the socially appropriate mode of looking. The very size of the photograph and the rituals of looking at photographs in galleries are likely to distance us from or bring us close to the actual object. The scale of the image also positions us in relationship to it. The way in which the man's head is lit (there is no natural light here, it is imported and arranged by the photographer), means that we 'read' the head as being in front of the already close black surface. It emerges from the black background or ground.

As we worked our way through the conventions that are at play in this image we saw, as they operated together, a photographic code. A set of signs that, taken together, means something to us. However, how we might express that meaning in spoken or written language is another matter. There are two reasons for this. One is a general matter of what and how images 'mean' and the second is particular to the kind of genre of art photography that Robert Mapplethorpe makes. In general, it can be very difficult to spell out the meanings of pictures in verbal or written language, which after all is another code. Some kind of translation is bound to take place either way but in this case from image to word. As John Berger (1972) has observed, language can never get on a level with images. Secondly, as a photographer working as an independent artist, Mapplethorpe is not charged with sending simple, clear messages or communicating unambiguous information to us. In fact, as a white gay photographer who frequently photographed naked black men his work is shot through with ambiguity and his interest in or desire to do this has provoked much debate (see Mercer, 1994: 171ff.).

Social conventions

Before we look further at the operation of photographic conventions and codes, we should recognize that photographs also work by utilizing or borrowing (by re-presenting them) many of the visual codes that are employed in 'lived' rather than textual forms of communication.

The mimetic capacity of a photograph, the way in which the indexical marks which its surface carries can resemble the look of objects and things in the real world, means that within a photograph certain things may be depicted or represented (through photographic conventions) which are themselves conventions in their own right. These are conventions that we employ in the wider social world, in our everyday lives and its sub-cultures. The photograph was described by Roland Barthes (1977:17) as being a 'message without a code'. By this he meant something close to Susan Sontag's (1978) description of the photograph as a 'trace', a kind of direct print off the 'real' without any code (break-down into units) intervening. It is, for us, much harder to see what the equivalent of the woodcutter's conventions are in a photograph,



Figure 4.5 David Hampshire. Photograph of schoolboys, circa 1986.

although in the above example we have, hopefully, begun to do so. However, the other side of the coin, as it were, of this mimetic capacity of photography to be a trace or an imprint of the real is that it can borrow and carry all of the sign systems and codes (of dress, style, architecture, objects, body language, etc.) which, together with speech and the written word, sound and smell, make the lived world meaningful.

In the photograph in Figure 4.5 we can see how this is so. We are now using the other, more sociological, concept of convention. Much of the charge of this picture comes from the dress conventions of the boys who are represented in it. In a real sense, the photographer is using photographic codes to frame and point to this other set of signs that are used in everyday life. Consider the boy on the left of the frame. He is subverting a dress code and by doing so he is signalling his distance from the meanings of 'respectable', conventional, male dress codes.

A tie is an item of dress that is designed so as to hang between the collar of a shirt and the waist after it has been wrapped around its wearer's neck and tied in a certain way at the front, so that its knot sits neatly between the two wings of a shirt collar. The boy in the picture has not failed to achieve these conventional requirements of tie-wearing - he has deliberately used his tie to flout them. He has, literally, made it do something else. He has consumed the whole length of the tie in the knot and contrived to position it some inches away from its conventional place. The meaning of doing this will be apparent to others who also wish to resist the conventional uniformity encouraged by the institution of the school. Symbolically, at least, he is signifying his sense of exclusion from the 'community' of the school and his inclusion or membership of 'the lads'. He is marking out a difference. Clearly, the success of his

semiotic work depends upon knowing first that there is a conventional way to wear ties. The boy in the centre of the picture has done something similar by turning his tailored and lapelled jacket into a kind of all-enveloping tunic. If we catch echoes of generic movie images of the rebel caught in the rain or cold, we are probably not far from identifying one of the sources for this particular convention.

Power and photographic conventions



Figure 4.6 New Year's Day, Korem camp, Wollo province, Ethiopia, 1985.



Figure 4.7 Mike Goldwater. Drought migrant, Zalazele transit centre, Tigray, 1983.

We now turn our attention to some photographs (Figures 4.6, 4.7, 4.8 and 4.9) where, given the institutions for which they were made (newspapers and magazines), we can assume some intention to communicate information was of a high priority. These are images which belong to the genre of photojournalism, images made specifically to report on events.

Like the Mapplethorpe portrait, but for different reasons, such photographs are also characteristically marked by their lack of apparent artifice or display of pictorial convention. Indeed, sometimes referred to as 'straight photography' to distinguish it from the elaborate arrangement, setting up, lighting and theatricality of other kinds of photography (advertising, fashion, art), the very invisibility of convention seems to speak instead of photography's power to provide direct evidence of events.

The credits tell us that the photographs were taken in Africa (Ethiopia and Sudan) during periods of famine in the 1980s. The original credits also indicate that the photographers who made these photographs were working for picture agencies (Magnum and Bisson/Collectif), probably on a freelance basis, and hoping to place their work with newspapers, magazines or, possibly, famine relief charities.

These photographs were reproduced as part of a special 1985 issue of the photographic journal *Ten: 8* which examined the politics of famine relief. It explored the part that photography played in constructing a Eurocentric view of Africa and its peoples as economically and technologically weak, dependent victims of natural disaster. The accompanying text argues the case that photojournalists foster this view and that, together with the demands upon aid agencies to raise money, a view of Africa and Africans

is constructed which renders their normal self-sufficiency and culture invisible. At the same time the manner in which famine is represented ignores the role of capitalism and the history of imperialism in bringing about a situation whereby African economies are crippled by long-term debt repayments, the use of fertile soil to grow cash crops for export and dependency on short-term emergency aid.

In the text which accompanies the reproduction of these photographs in *Ten: 8*, some research is cited which indicates what ideas and images of the 'Third World' and its peoples a group of London school pupils gained from television and photo-reportage. They list poverty, babies dying, monsoons, disease, drought, refugees, flies, death, dirty water, beggars, malnutrition, bald children, large families, insects, poor clothing, bad teeth, kids with pot bellies, mud huts and injections (Simpson, 1985: 23).

These are all important factors which bear upon matters such as the tasks and commissions which the photographers are given, the purposes of the agencies that they work for, the 'news values' that they are expected to provide and the selection and editing of images by editorial staff for publication (see the section above, 'Context of production').

However, in this section we wish to concentrate upon how meaning is encoded in particular photographs. The point is to see what ideological weight conventions have, especially when they operate as parts of a complex photographic code. For the photographer who wishes to avoid producing yet another image which compounds the restricted perceptions of Africa noted above, there will be a struggle to encode different meanings in a photograph, something that begins with the choice to deploy conventions in a single act of image making. We can see this in the two images reproduced in Figures 4.6 and 4.7.

Both images represent people in obvious distress. The main signs of this distress are facial expression, the gesture of hands, bodily position and stance. We noted above that these were not, strictly speaking, photographic conventions but more broadly social and cultural ones which photographs 'cite'. They are part of the human body's expressivity. Our ability to read the signs through which bodily and mental states are expressed is a social not a photographic skill. The photographer expertly borrows these signs and relies upon our abilities, learnt through our lived experience, to read them. Often to a high degree these signs are indexical, the class of signs famously identified by C.S. Peirce where the material sign (the signifier) is caused by what it means (the signified). The usual examples in semiotic primers are the footprint ~ foot, smoke = fire and knock at door - presence. They are different because they are less arbitrary and symbolic than signs like 'dog' or 'chien' are for the animal it signifies. In these latter cases, these ink marks on paper are not caused by dogs having passed this way.

In Figure 4.6 there is a certain strain in the musculature of the man's face, in his open mouth and furrowed brow, which we can recognize as meaning something in the sphere of pain and hopelessness. Likewise, in 'Drought migrant' (Figure 4.7), the woman's eyes are heavy-lidded and unfocused, while she 'holds' her head - they signify something in the sphere of exhaustion and nervous distraction. It is hard to be precise, but we would surely agree on what they do not signify and on the spectrum of conditions and feelings where the meanings lie. A photograph trades in mimesis,

in establishing perceivable and meaningful similarities between one thing (a human face) and another (a set of tones on a paper surface).

There are, of course, varying degrees of such direct, symptomatic indexicality in human and bodily expressions. Consider the 'coded' smile which is not a direct expression of pleasure but a knowing and ironic response to disappointment or sadness. However, when such signs are themselves represented in a photograph, they are far from natural. Consider that before and after the moment of the photographic exposure that produced these images the subject's expression and position might have been different and less culturally or symbolically expressive of distress. First, it is likely that the photographer took a number of exposures and later chose (edited) a contact strip of her or his film to choose the image in which the signs of distress (of whatever order) were most evident. (Or selections may have been made by a picture editor, anxious to reinforce particular inflections of the famine story.) Second, there is no direct equivalence between a human face seen in a photograph and in other lived situations, something that was pointed out in discussing the Mapplethorpe portrait.

We will now consider the material qualities of some particular photographs and how they work to add meaning to these social codes and, as they do so, edge us toward recognizing how the photograph is a complex construct of signs.

First, we consider the edges or boundaries of the pictures: the frame. The framing of the 'straightest' picture is something that must be decided upon both at the time of offering up the camera's lens to the scene and later when making a print in an enlarger (or, in the case of digitized pictures, in a computer image manipulation programme), or possibly when digitally or physically cropping the print. In 'New Year's Day' (Figure 4.6) the frame is set wide: over two-thirds of the picture area represents a surface which we read as a baked and cracked plain of earth, some far-distant figures, a line of low hills behind them, a strip of almost cloudless sky. The setting of the frame in this way with the figure of the kneeling man, slightly off-centre, is the first means by which he is located and isolated in this barren space. If we imagine tightening the frame and shifting it to our left, no doubt to include a second or more figures in the picture, this image of isolation disappears.

Second, we consider the depth of field, a term which refers to how much of the scene is in sharp focus and, depending upon available light and speed of film, is a factor within the photographer's control. By choosing a combination of shutter speed and aperture (or allowing an automatic camera to set them) depth of field can be shallow or deep, restricting or amplifying the information we are given. The depth of field in this image is considerable. We see the cracked earth on which the man sits, the texture of his worn garments and the delineation of the tiny distant figures and hills. This choice of depth of field (or at least the choice not to limit it) reinforces the sense of the man's isolation, first established by the frame.

Third, we consider the quality of the light that makes the man visible and the photograph possible. Clearly this is natural ambient light (the midday sun?) which is not directly within the photographer's control. However, it is utilized by the photographer and the manner in which strong light with a high source, directly above the subject, describes surfaces in terms of stark contrasts is an important factor here. The deep shadow marking the man's eye sockets and the sharp delineation of his collar

bone and upper ribs are given emphasis by the photographer's choice to make the exposure at a place and a time when the light is of this kind. Compare this with 'Drought migrant' (Figure 4.7) where the light is more diffuse.

The focus and the light are also reinforced by the fine grain and optical resolution of the photograph. The skin of the man's head, veins standing proud on his temple, the surface of his neck and chest, the rough texture of his clothes and the cracked earth are all very apparent to us. Through these optical means our tactile sense is engaged.

Fourth, we can note that the frame or moment chosen by the photographer has the man looking upwards and out of the frame to his right. He looks up at something or someone who is invisible to us. A number of factors that we have already considered work together with this gaze (the facial expression, the delineation of the face and body, the isolation in space) to make this an image of tragic supplication. Such a gaze also adds a narrative element to the picture: something is happening outside of the space and the moment of the photograph to which it nevertheless alludes (see Chapter 7). The camera's point of view (the place from which we look) is high. He kneels; 'we' stand.

Turning now to 'Drought migrant' (Figure 4.7) we can see how each of these factors plays a different role. The face and upper body of the woman occupies over half of the framed picture area. We are positioned on a level with her. She is shot in close up and, as with the Mapplethorpe photograph, codes of space and personal proximity are put in play. Yet, markedly different from either the Mapplethorpe or the previous picture of the man on the parched plain, her eyes do not engage ours or actively direct our attention elsewhere. They look forward and out of the picture space towards the space we occupy as viewers, but in a 'blank', unfocused way that does not directly answer our own gaze and we can read as a symptom of exhaustion. The light in this photograph is less harsh and revealing of contrasts, softer and more diffuse, than that in 'New Year's Day' (Figure 4.6). The depth of field is shallow and we cannot read what is behind her or where she is, except to see a blurred image of a second woman whose gesture echoes her own.

Overall, even though we have again a single main subject in a landscape format, we can conclude that this woman is not positioned and represented as an isolated victim seeking or imploring help, physical state unflinchingly delineated, as is the man in 'New Year's Day'. The softness of light and grain, the interiority of the woman's gaze together with the rhetorical quality of the way her hands are included in the frame and cradle her head, and a choreographed quality in the way this gesture is echoed in the second figure, approaches an aestheticization of the horror of the woman's situation.

Finally, we turn to two other images (Figures 4.8 and 4.9) from the same edition of the magazine. These enable us to introduce some new points about photographic codes and the 'positioning' of the viewer. They are also useful because in comparing this new pair with the two images of 'famine' we have so far been discussing, we are alerted to the relative similarity of those two images rather than their differences, which has been the object of our analysis so far.

'USAid' (Figure 4.8) introduces the element of juxtaposition within the frame. The depth of field ensures that we read the letters USAID on the side of a Range Rover



Figure 4.8 Chris Steele-Perkins. USAid, Sudan, 1985.



Figure 4.9 Mike Wells. A food convoy passing through Korem Refugee Camp on its way to Makele Camp in Tigray, February 1985.

positioned on the picture plane close to a group of women huddled in the foreground. For the European-American viewer the 'ethnic' dress and swathed faces of the women are played off against an icon of the West's advanced automobile technology. At first sight, like the man in 'New Year's Day' (Figure 4.6), we see that the attention of the group of women is directed towards another event taking place beyond the frame, until we notice that the third woman from the left is looking across the direction of the others' gazes and directly at the camera. Unlike the explicit and direct meeting of the camera's/viewer's gaze in the Mapplethorpe image (which makes no pretension to be a documentary record), we have here a rupturing of the documentary rhetoric. Our position as voyeurs (seeing but not seen) and the power of the camera to scrutinize (without its operation itself being scrutinized) is revealed. 'We' are seen and our gaze is returned. So in this image the photographer is, in a sense, caught in the act of constructing, through juxtaposition, a statement about what is before him.

In 'A food convey' (Figure 4.9), for the first time in this brief analysis, the camera shares the viewpoint and perspective of the subjects in the photograph. We stand with and behind the group who attend to their water pots and as the child raises its hand at the passing Red Cross convoy. If we return to think about the image of the 'redneck' in the Marlboro advertisement with which we began this chapter, which similarly 'invites' us to look with the depicted subject(s), we can begin to see how the more technical proposition of a 'viewing position' opens up into the fuller concept of a 'subject position'. Who are we, in each case? Who looks like this, with others, and at what?

LOOKING: RECOGNITION AND IDENTITY

Who is the viewer and how are they placed to look? Being 'placed', part of having an identity, is to some extent given by the form of the image itself. In short, all or most images in the Western pictorial tradition (and this includes most photographic images where the camera and its lenses have become key mechanisms in furthering and elaborating this tradition) are designed or structured so as to 'tell' the viewer where they are. As Bill Nichols has argued: 'Renaissance painters fabricated textual systems approximating the cues relating to normal perception better than any other strategy until the emergence of photography' (Nichols, 1981: 52).

As we have already noted (see p. 73), camera technology was developed and adjusted in order to take on perspectival conventions already established within Western art. Nichols goes on to argue that just as the painting stands in for that which it represents, so perspective, organized in relation to a singular imaginary point of origin, stands in for the emphasis on the individual concomitant with the emergence in the West of entrepreneurial capitalism. Thus the viewing position constructed via the camera cannot be seen as ideologically neutral. Rather, particular value systems, organized around individualism, inform our look.

That this viewing position is voyeuristic has become something of a preoccupation within cultural studies. As we have already remarked, in the Mapplethorpe portrait the man viewed seems to look back at us. This is relatively unusual. More commonly,

we look at images of people who appear unaware of the presence of the camera and - by extension - the possibility of becoming the object of someone else's look. Thus, it has been argued, the viewer exercises a controlling gaze. This notion of the voyeuristic gaze has been used to describe the way in which tourists look at the non-Western world as well as the way men often look at women (see Chapter 3).

In her well-known article on narrative cinema and visual pleasure, first published in 1975, Laura Mulvey drew upon Freud's emphasis upon scopophilia as a primary human instinct and his ensuing discussion of voyeurism within her analysis of the processes and pleasures of popular cinema spectatorship. She argued that the (male) spectator voyeuristically gratifies his erotogenic impulses through his controlling look, which is mediated through the look of the camera and through the look of male characters within the world of the film, at the female figure on screen. The argument is complex but, in brief, she concluded that pleasure in popular narrative cinema emerges from the fetishization of the female figure as an object of desire. Although subsequently criticized for its narrow concern with the male heterosexual spectator, this essay was ground-breaking at the time as it was an early attempt to articulate psychoanalysis and feminism in order to analyse visual pleasure.

Victor Burgin took up this model in relation to looking at photographs:

Following recent work in film theory, and adopting its terminology, we may identify four basic types of look in the photograph: the look of the camera as it photographs the 'pro-photographic' event; the look of the viewer as he or she looks at the photograph; the 'intra-diegetic' looks exchanged between people (actors) depicted in the photograph (and/or looks from actors towards objects); and the look the actor may direct to the camera. (Burgin, 1982:148)

'An oblique glance' (Figure 4.2) offers an exemplary opportunity to demonstrate and discuss the mobilization of the look within photography. The camera occupies the essentially voyeuristic position of being hidden in the shop out of the sight of passers-by, thus constructing a voyeuristic position for the viewer of the photograph whose 'catching out' of the couple cannot be acknowledged since they have no idea of the presence of the candid camera. Since the camera is not acknowledged, what preoccupies us here, and, indeed, offers the primary source of interest and amusement, is the exchange of looks within the photograph. To be more precise, it is a traversing of looks, rather than an exchange, since the woman is contemplating, and appears to be speaking about, an image which we cannot see whilst the man glances across her to contemplate the fetishized nakedness of the woman depicted in the ornately framed painting. The humour lies in this traverse, in the neat observation of a subversive moment which is heightened through the presence of the boys in the background outside the shop across the road (perhaps engaged in some mischievous activity) - in other words, the ordinariness of the setting.

As Mary Ann Doane has argued, this image appears to centre upon the woman looking, yet what makes it interesting in terms of the psychoanalytic is the scopophilic gaze of the man placed half out of the frame (Doane, 1991: 28ff.). His gaze effectively encases and negates hers, not only because the object of her look cannot be seen and shared by us but also because the geometry of the image is defined by the male axis

of vision across from one edge of the image to the other. Her gaze centres on an image invisible to us and has no part to play within the triangle of looks which offers complicity between the man, the nude and the viewer and thus animates the image. Indeed, the woman, despite being central within the picture, functions as the butt of the joke which is what the picture is actually about. This joke confirms women's place as object of the look since the key female presence is not that of the woman within the couple but that of the nude in the painting. This photograph engages the viewer in complicity with the man in ways which, as with the photograph of the schoolboys discussed earlier, articulate recognition of and, possibly, identification with a certain subversiveness. In this instance, however, the position of identification is distinctly uncomfortable for the female viewer since it is founded on the objectification of the naked woman, in phallogentric understandings of desire.

The bringing of psychoanalysis to bear on the image has been influential. As noted earlier, Mulvey (1975) drew upon Freud's discussion of scopophilia, the instinct to look, and voyeurism, the desire to exercise a controlling gaze, in order to discuss the positioning of the female figure in popular cinema as the passive bearer or object of the male gaze. For Freud woman was 'other*' and femininity was a mysterious riddle. As he famously remarked about women, 'you are yourselves the problem' (Freud, 1933:146). Mulvey drew upon psychoanalysis to investigate ways in which, in narrative film, pleasure in looking was constructed around the active male look. Despite criticism for focusing on the male gaze and heterosexual looking/desire, her essay made a key contribution within Visual Cultural Studies as it introduced debates about the pleasures of looking at images which articulated questions of social power - in this instance, patriarchy - with questions of sexuality and the erotogenic imaginary.

Within Visual Cultural Studies such debates broadened initially to take account of the female gaze, of homosexual looking and of what John Urry has termed 'the tourist gaze' (Urry, 1990). As Patricia Holland has remarked in relation to ethnic otherness:

The coming of photography gave rise to a new set of dilemmas around the production of the exotic. On the one hand it displayed images of hitherto unknown and remarkable places and people, but at the same time it had to be recognised that these were *real* places and people. The veneer of exoticism may be confirmed or challenged by the photograph itself. (Holland, 1997:113)

Thus broader parameters have been adopted: analysis of the gaze now considers a complexity of social positions and power relations, and also takes into account the implications of looking *from* positions defined as 'other'.

More recently issues pertaining to the fluidity of identity have been brought into play. Here, psychoanalytically informed questions relating to identity and identification processes influence sociologically determined questions associated with cultural self-location. Following Laplanche and Pontalis, we can take identification as a 'psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides' (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988:205). They add that 'it is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified'. This obviously

draws upon Freud, but it can take us into discussions of the power of representation, and of identification processes within societies acknowledged as multi-cultural ethnically, and also in terms such as class or region. As Bailey and Hall have argued:

Post-structuralist thinking opposes the notion that a person is born with a fixed identity - that all black people, for example, have an essential, underlying black identity which is the same and unchanging. It suggests instead that identities are floating, that meaning is not fixed and universally true at all times for all people, and that the subject is constructed through the unconscious in desire, fantasy and memory. This theory helps explain why for example an individual might shift from feeling black in one way when they are young, to black in another way when they are older - and not only black but male/female, and not only black but gay/heterosexual, and so on. (Bailey and Hall, 1992:20)

They add that 'identities are positional in relation to the discourses around us. That is why the notion of representation is so important - identity can only be articulated as a set of representations' (1992:21). Here, first, identity is seen as unfixed and, second, it is conceptualized as complexly and ambiguously caught up within identification processes.

Returning to the pictures of African people disempowered economically and subjected to famine (Figures 4.6 to 4.9), how are we positioned as viewers of these pictures? Here many of us are clearly *not* like the people pictured. Our position is as virtual tourist, Western outsider, as onlooker. However, ambiguities do enter in. We may identify at some level as women, or in terms of ethnicity, not with the plight of the people depicted so much as in a sort of universal humanitarian way. This identification is in accord with the rhetoric of these images which invite compassion, and are broadly recognizable as the type of pictures used by aid agencies and charities for fund-raising. Fundamental within this is the reassurance of otherness and of our safer social and political location.

By contrast, if we return to the Mapplethorpe portrait, our sense of self may be more ambiguously caught up within a set of slippages associated with sexuality and, from a white point of view, fascination with the ethnic other (which seems to have motivated a number of Mapplethorpe's portraits and has been one of the key sources of offence at, and attempts to censor, his work). Yet a similar complexity is associated with a recent advertisement for Pirelli tyres (Figure 4.10). Pirelli are known for producing calendars featuring naked women as pin-ups, which, in the 1970s, attracted disapprobation from feminists concerned with media representations of women. This image of Carl Lewis, the male athlete, poised as if to sprint but wearing red stilettos (which would prevent him from running anywhere) references the fetishization of the pin-up, deliberately playing upon ambiguities in gender, ethnicity and sexuality. As an image of a black 'hero' it challenges and disorients assumptions. We might fantasize ourselves as a successful athlete, and thus in some way identify with Carl Lewis, but the ambiguity of this image probably stops us short in our tracks. In discussing the spectacle of the other, Stuart Hall comments that this image works through acknowledging difference: 'The conventional identification of Lewis with black male athletes and with a sort of "super-masculinity" is disturbed and undercut

by the invocation of his "femininity" - and what marks this is the signifier of the red shoes' (Hall, 1997:233). The advert arrests attention through playing with conventional signifiers and stereotypes, confident in our reading competencies, that is, in our ability to unpick and enjoy the range of intertextual references mobilized.

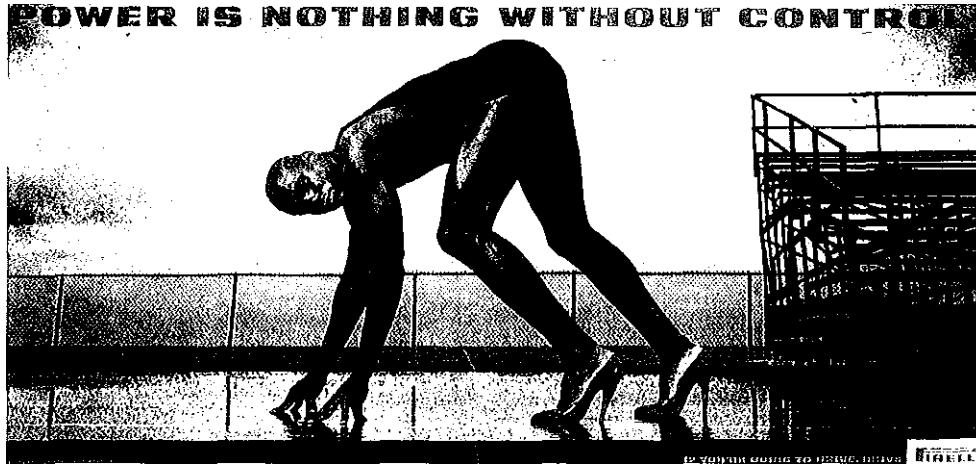


Figure 4.10 Carl Lewis photograph for a Pirelli advertisement.

So far all the pictures we have discussed have figured people. Finally, in Figure 4.11, we consider a landscape empty of people but replete with cultural references. Here a photograph of a biscuit cutter, in the shape of a sheep, is placed on top of a pile of hewn stone in the foreground of a moorland landscape. It has been constructed primarily as a gallery image and, as with all images, relies upon the viewer bringing a set of previous knowledges or competencies into play. It is one of a series in which domestic romanticization of the rural is wryly noted through the photographing of a toy or kitchen utensil in the location which it references. This work is culturally specific, relying as it does on familiarity with British land, with landscape aesthetics and with what we might term the 'Laura Ashley - National Trust' invocation of the pastoral. The stone walls imply that this is moorland, rather than central England farmland.

As with all photographs it is productive to discuss this image in immanent terms, taking account of framing, composition, tonal contrast and accordance with the photographic convention of representing land through translating views into black and white landscapes. In formal terms, it complies with the landscape aesthetic of horizontal divide as a one-third:two-third proportion; the land rolls away downwards before rising into the distance; the stone wall is foregrounded through sharp photographic focus which we decode as emphasizing its significance within the picture. The camera has been placed to underscore the placing of the 'sheep' in this position, overlooking the land, exercising a territorial gaze. Irony resides in recognizing the incongruity of placing a biscuit cutter to stand in for the relation of actual sheep to

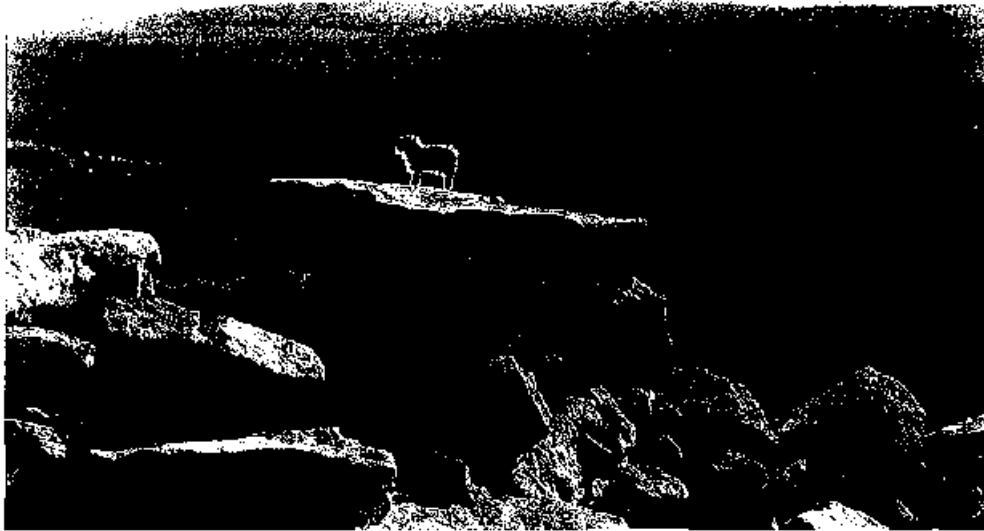


Figure 4.11 Sean Bonnell. Chalk Down, from the series Groundings, 1996.

the moorlands which are their pastures and which, in turn, are grasslands kept from overgrowth through the grazing of sheep, goats and ponies.

From the point of view of the viewer there is yet more to be said. The wall on which the sheep stands represents a boundary or obstacle beyond which we are not supposed to step. We are excluded from the empty, expansive hillsides. Arguably, we are reminded of our place as observer, rather than as roamer. For those of us who draw rural England into our sense of national identity, there is also reassurance of something which may seem essentially British. Here we might contemplate the priority allocated to looking, to opticality, implicit in the photograph as a visual medium and, in this instance, in the photographing of land as landscape. The image may conjure up affective memories of other senses heightened in actual experience of the rural: sound, smell, touch.

So, as we now see. Viewing position' is one component of a more complex concept - a 'subject position' (see Chapter 9). The simplest examples include those images which place us in a privileged position to see things clearly or synoptically (some argue 'panoptically'). Others cast us as voyeurs, hidden from the view of those depicted ('others') on whose bodies or actions we gaze from our occluded position. Yet other images belittle us, overawing us with their scale, relative physical placing and the perspectival rendering of the position of those who look down upon us. This particularly relates to certain settings: church, art gallery and, as we have seen in the

case of Marlboro, billboards. Many images centre us in a complex world laid out for our eye in ways that would be impossible in reality. Issues of proximity, intimacy and distance are important here. However, beyond placing us, images also tell us who we are in other ways; they offer us an identity. This is a transient sense of identity consequent upon looking at the image, engaging with and enjoying the messages and meanings it then gives to us.

CONCLUSION

As Annette Kuhn has succinctly commented:

In general, photographs connote truth and authenticity when what is 'seen' by the camera eye appears to be an adequate stand-in for what is seen by the human eye. Photographs are coded, but usually so as to appear uncoded. The truth/authenticity potential of photography is tied in with the idea that seeing is believing. Photography draws on an ideology of the visible as evidence. (Kuhn, 1985: 27)

Nevertheless, photographs are often treated as if they were a source of objective and disinterested facts, rather than as complexly coded cultural artefacts. Roland Barthes (1984) draws our attention to the fleeting nature of the moment captured in the photograph and the extent to which contemporary experience, along with limited knowledge of the specific context within which - and purpose for which - the photograph was taken, inform ways of seeing and introduce slippages of meaning into any view of the image as witness. Photography contributes to the construction of history; it is not a passive bystander. When photographs are presented as 'evidence' of past events and circumstances, a set of assumptions about their accuracy as documents is being made. Such assumptions are usually acknowledged through statements of provenance: dates, sources, and so on. But this is to ignore wider questions about photographs concerning their status and processes of interpretation. As we have already noted, usefully, Susan Sontag (1978) uses the term 'trace' to express the caution with which the analyst needs to think about the relation of the photograph to the material world. As Allan Sekula remarks: 'Ultimately, then, when photographs are uncritically presented as historical documents, they are transformed into aesthetic objects. Accordingly, the pretence to historical understanding remains although that understanding has been replaced by aesthetic experience' (Sekula, 1991:123).

As this implies, the original reasons for making an image, and the constraints operating within the context of its making, may disappear only to be replaced by new and substitute references and expectations. Furthermore, whatever an image depicts or shows us, the material means and medium employed to do so have a bearing upon which qualities of the depicted thing or event are foregrounded. For instance, our responses are influenced by the use of glossy paper as against cheaper, matt, absorbent paper or by the differences brought about by the use of high or low resolution VDUs when considering images downloaded from a website or stored on CD-ROM. Finally, it is not possible to separate out 'what is said' from 'how it is said'. To recognize this is not necessarily to go as far as Marshall McLuhan's edict that 'the medium is the

message' but it is to recognize a degree of sense in his insight. Roland Barthes used the term 'the rhetoric of the image' to point to the way in which seductive or persuasive means are employed to make an argument or to convince us to see things a certain way.

The photographic image is, then, a complex and curious object. As we have shown, the methodological eclecticism of Cultural Studies allows the analyst to attend to the many moments within the cycle of production, circulation and consumption of the image through which meanings accumulate, slip and shift. This is achieved through holding in play diverse approaches to the image which in their interaction acknowledge this complexity. This is simultaneously its strength and a point of criticism.⁵ Indeed, in some ways Cultural Studies may seem to be a rather messy field, lacking precise boundaries and unconstrained by any single set of disciplinary protocols. But its ability to articulate a range of systematic methods of analysis in order to complexly address questions of form, production, reception and meaning while taking account of political issues, institutions and ideological discourses makes it comprehensive, significant and fascinating as a field of operation. The refusal to be prescriptive about method but rather to point to a variety of methods, and also to encourage analysts to bring into play their own experience, further underpins the strength of Cultural Studies.

NOTES

- 1 However, for the contrary argument, that Cultural Studies should be or is a discipline, see Bennett, T. (1998).
- 2 Given that historically men have been more active than women as photographers, and given the criteria mentioned above, together with the copyright availability of examples known to us, what we have constructed is a sequence mainly of photographs of men by men. A number are also of black African people, photographed by white photojournalists and now commented upon by white intellectuals. Does this matter? Cultural Studies (sometimes referred to as 'victim studies') is frequently charged with an obsession with political correctness (PC). We would say it does matter but the answer is not to add a PC 'quota' of images. The point is to be aware, reflexively, of how the work we are doing (the academic exemplification and exegesis of a kind of method) and the conditions in which we are doing it mean that some things have been rendered invisible and others have not been foregrounded.
- 3 News values in Media Studies refers to particular dominant agendas within news reporting associated with subject-matter, urgency, assumptions about the appropriate style of treatment, and so on.
- 4 An instance would be Oliveri Toscani, the Benetton art director, whose name in itself now serves to confer extra interest in the campaign or product, recently exemplified in his leadership of a campaign to draw attention to tourism and its implications for the survival of Venice.
- 5 For instance, Victor Burgin has accused Cultural Studies of borrowing from psychoanalysis in ways which over-simplify and therefore misappropriate concepts and terminology (Burgin, 1996).

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