

Lister & Wells, “Seeing Beyond Belief”

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If you want some more background on cultural studies, read Martin Lister and Liz Wells’ essay “Seeing Beyond Belief: Cultural Studies as an Approach to Analysing the Visual.” Though our class is on reading and analyzing literature, the “approaches” that Lister & Wells outline and discuss are relevant to all Cultural Studies work. The project, practice, and production of knowledge and understanding called Cultural Studies comes from a long history, many different schools and perspectives, and theoretical and ideological foundations. However, the general goal is the engagement with, articulation of, unpacking of, and sometimes challenging of the “culture” around us. Here are some pertinent passages that summarize Lister & Wells’ arguments.

“Cultural Studies centers on the study of the forms and practices of culture (not only its texts and artifacts), 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 artifacts), such as hoping, traveling or being a football supporter, and ‘textual practices’ in the sense that some kind of material artifact or representation, image, performance, display, space, writing or narrative is produced” (431)

“A distinctive feature of Cultural studies is the search to understand the relationship of cultural production, consumption, belief, and meaning, to social processes and institutions” (431)

“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” (431)

“Cultural and Media Studies is a compound field, elements of which are differently organized in different institutions. It is generally understood as an interdisciplinary field, rather than as a discrete discipline...most research methodology courses within and Cultural and Media Studies includes elements of ethnographic, sociological, semiotic, psychoanalytic and critical textual methods” (433)

“One way of approaching a definition of Cultural Studies is to consider its objects of enquiry as the ways it understands the complex concept of ‘culture’. These include, for instance, the ‘ordinariness’ or ‘everydayness’ of culture, an interest in culture as the process through which a society or a social group produces meanings. There is a stress upon the ‘how’ as well as the ‘what’ of culture, on productions as well as contexts” (433)

“‘the circuit of culture’” (as qtd. in L&W 434)

“...there is no neutral looking” (434)

“We need to first ask where the image is. What is its location (or locations) in the social and physical world?” (434)

“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?” (435)

“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” (438)

“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” (44)

“...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)” (442)

“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’” (442)

“This is not to say that the photographers consciously chose the conventions that they will use in making a picture. Some may of course...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” (443)

“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” (443)

“...means that within a photograph certain things may be depicted or represented (through photographic convention) 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 as being a ‘message without a code’. By this he meant something close to Susan Sontag’s description of the photograph as a ‘trace’, a kind of direct print off the ‘real’ without any code (break-down into units) intervening” (445-446)

“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...are designed or structure so as to ‘tell’ the viewer where they are” (451)

“the voyeuristic gaze” (452)

“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’” (454)

“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” (454)

“subject position” (456)

“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” (457)

“Nevertheless, photographs are often treated as if they were a source of objective and disinterested facts, rather than as complexly coded cultural artifacts” (457)

“Photography contributes to the construction of history; it is not a passive bystander” (457)

“the rhetoric of the image” (458)

Bibliography

Lister, Martin and Liz Wells. “Seeing Beyond Belief: Cultural Studies as an Approach to Analysing the Visual.” Reading Contexts. Ed. Gail Stygall. New York: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005. 431-459.