

## REVIEW

### **A STUDENT-FRIENDLY AND CRITICAL BOOK ABOUT VISUAL METHODOLOGIES. PRAISE AND CRITIQUE.**

*Visual Methodologies. An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials by Gillian Rose (4th Edition. London, Sage, 2016)*

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Gillian Rose's book is a very important and unique overview of visual methodologies. One of its novelties is the very list of the methods that are introduced. This is because it contains methodologies which are not typically visual at first glance, like content analysis and discourse analysis. Another significant and unusual characteristic of this book is its critical and self-reflexive approach which is reflected not only in the assessment of the methods which are discussed, but in the examples which are introduced. Moreover, this volume is in its fourth edition, which indicates persistent interest in the topic. Furthermore, the author continuously develops the content of the book to keep pace with new technologies and new areas of related research.

The goal of the book is to provide a comprehensive overview of visual methodologies to undergraduate students. Additionally, Rose offers not only methodological descriptions but a critical assessment too, based on her own critical approach. The volume clearly keeps these promises: both structure and language are extremely student-friendly, clear and transparent, and Rose applies her critical approach to every segment of text. However, in my opinion the flip side of these advantages are the primary shortcomings of the book. Namely – and probably due to its target group – at some points the reader has the feeling that the discussion of the methods lacks theoretical depth. Furthermore, when reading the whole book its critical tone becomes overwhelming, and from chapter to chapter it seems that nothing is good enough for the author.

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But let us return to the first pages. Scanning the table of contents, the reader finds topics which may surprise them at first in a book about visual methodology. For example, content analysis and discourse analysis are typical chapters of books about textual methodologies, but not visual ones. This in itself makes the book uncommon. Moreover, the fact that this is the fourth edition of the book shows not only its success, but its up-to-date features. Indeed, Gillian Rose makes considerable effort to integrate new technologies and areas of research into the book. Therefore, she has expanded the discussion on digital media platforms (e.g. by including Twitter and Facebook), and incorporated a chapter on digital methods which deals with online image analysis. Another new topic (and chapter) appears in this edition: the visualisation of research results, which reflects an increasingly pronounced phenomenon and demand; namely, that the results of academic research and their dissemination could and should be visual (such as interactive documentaries or photo-essays).

The student-friendly features of the book become apparent even in the first chapters. In the introduction, Rose describes the structure of the book, introducing in brief the goals and content of every chapter. Additionally, there are 'instructions' about how to read the book in two places: at the end of the introduction there are details about the 'must read' parts, and there is also a whole chapter entitled 'How to use this book'. This latter proposes different selection methods for the chapters which take into consideration the goal of the reader's research topic and methodological interests. Furthermore, the structure of the methodological chapters are similar. All of them start with a short introduction of the goal and key points. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical and then the methodological framework of the given method, illustrated using a lot of examples. Every methodological chapter contains an assessment of the method under discussion using the authors own critical framework, and closes with a summary of the main points. There are independent boxes in the text in which the reader can find additional examples, interesting and sometimes even controversial questions, and topics for debate. These might be of great help to teachers in the classroom for involving students in a conversation about research themes and methodological issues.

Additionally, there is a website for the book which includes an ample amount of student resources, such as sample materials, further reading, videos, and even exercises for the interested reader. This feature is a further example of the student-friendliness and modern approach of the book, and contributes to creating an excellent teaching resource.

Now, let's take a closer look at the theoretical and methodological content. Gillian Rose starts her book with a brief overview of the field and description of the main concepts, such as 'visual' and 'critical'. In the second chapter she

introduces her critical visual approach, which serves as a reference point for every method discussed in the book. She has elaborated a complex framework which includes four sites of critical visual methodology: production, the image itself, its circulation and its 'audiencing'. These sites of visual methodology can be interpreted in three dimensions: technical modality, compositional modality, and social modality. The author assesses every method in the later chapters against this model (the model figure can be found on Page 25), and assesses them according to which points are addressed, and which sites and dimensions are lacking. These chapters are somewhat abstract – as Rose herself admits – but they are nonetheless important for understanding the theoretical framework and reflective approach of the author.

After these introductory chapters, Rose describes seven methods using the previously mentioned analytical structure. These methods include compositional interpretation, content analysis, semiology, psychoanalysis, discourse analysis (in two chapters), audience studies and digital methods. The twelfth chapter deals with visual images as research findings, while the next chapter addresses visual images as tools of research dissemination. Rose pays particular attention to the ethical issues concerning research ethics and the use of visual materials in Chapter 14. The book closes with a brief review and raises the issue of mixed methods, which is nowadays another popular and forward-looking methodological area. Additional reading lists, references, key terms, name- and subject-indexes are contained at the end of the book.

All of the methodological chapters contain a lot of visual examples and research descriptions. Moreover, every one of them starts with a key example which is referred to throughout the chapter (such as during the description of the methodological process, the critical analysis, and so on). Rose describes not only the theoretical background and main definitions, but the basic methodological steps and questions as well. Although the theories and methods are not too deeply elaborated, sources and additional reading materials are mentioned in every case (not only in the book, but on the website too), so the interested reader can investigate further. Rose not only introduces the methods, but raises thought-provoking questions and initiates discussions about methodological and ethical issues. Moreover, she appraises every method using her own critical visual model, and assesses them regarding their efforts to incorporate the critical and social aspects of their subjects.

There are two chapters (the before-mentioned content analysis, and discourse analysis) which will especially capture the attention of those who are familiar with these methods as tools of textual analysis, as they are here interpreted as visual ones. Rose gives us a clear and structured overview of content analysis (CA), mainly based on one of the famous CA scholars, Klaus Krippendorff.

She defines four steps of CA, from sample through to creating categories, then coding and analysis of results. Every step is illustrated with examples from key research or other pieces of research. As a key example, she applies research by Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins (*Reading National Geographic*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993). These authors analysed nearly six hundred photographs from National Geographic magazine from 1950-1986. Although Rose is critical about this research, it serves as an excellent illustration of the logic of content analysis, which “is based on counting the frequency of certain visual elements in a clearly defined population of images, and then analysing those frequencies” (p. 88). Lutz and Collins were interested in how the non-Western world is illustrated in this magazine, especially with regard to topics such as race, history and power. In this chapter Gillian Rose broadens her field of attention to include a new, computer-based, visual CA-approach called cultural analytics, which is an automated method of analysing huge amounts of digital images from a specified viewpoint. Its founder and main protagonist is Lev Manovich (*The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2001, and *Software Takes Command*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013).

The chapters on discourse analysis (DA) (Chapters 8 and 9) show how Rose is not afraid to deal with difficult methods and questions, although she takes two chapters to provide even a very basic summary of discourse analysis and its different streams. The length of these chapters and the greater number of examples indicate that this was not an easy task. And, despite these heroic efforts, these chapters remain somewhat vague – partly because these approaches lack easily structured theoretical and methodological processes (unlike the situation with content analysis), and the relevant research is so complex that summarizing it in a few sentences unavoidably leads to simplification. Additionally, understanding of these chapters is made even more complicated due to Rose’s critiques of the method and its weaknesses. Nonetheless, these chapters may serve as the first steps into the ‘realm of discourse analysis’ which involves stimulating and complex approaches to language and society and their much-layered relationships. Rose introduces two areas of DA, one of which focuses on the rhetorical organisation of discourses, and the other on institutions. Both of these are based on Foucault’s approach, but while in Chapter 8 the main focus is on examining how specific views are constructed by referring to them as truthful or natural, Chapter 9 deals with the practices of different institutions as production sites for human subjects. In the latter chapter the key example involves research about museums and archives, and how these serve as sources of authority. In Chapter 8, meanwhile, the main illustration is a piece of research which analysed a lot of images about the East End of London in the 1880s, which was that time an area where many poor people lived. The research analysed how

these images (paintings, maps, etc.) produced the so-called 'true' nature of these people, which was a one-sided and prejudiced picture, and how different related topics (like prostitution) were constructed discursively by them.

These two methods demonstrate the interesting and unique visual approaches of Rose's book and clarify how she introduces readers to this methodological field: she provides the basics both methodologically and theoretically, and presents numerous examples from previous research. In my opinion, she succeeds in addressing her target group (that is, undergraduate students) and the book should serve as a starting point even at the graduate or post-graduate level. Nonetheless, for use in more complex research it should be supplemented, not only theoretically, but methodologically too.

Despite this praise, there is one feature of the publication that could disturb the reader: namely, the overwhelming critical focus of the book. Rose introduces her critical approach at the very beginning of the book and emphasises the importance of self-reflexivity. These issues are extremely important and commonly under-discussed in modern methodological books and courses. Accordingly, it is refreshing to read a book which is based wholly on this approach. Nonetheless, even for a reader with a critical attitude (like the writer of this review), Rose's highly critical approach becomes overwhelming after some chapters. Rose is critical not only about different methods, which is typical of methodological books, but of the key examples and previous research which she herself cites as illustration. At some point the reader may feel that no method can reach the standards of completeness her model describes, and thus they all are lacking something. This conclusion stems from the extreme complexity of the framework, and leads to Rose's appraisal of the inadequacy of the methods, despite the advantages and different types of applicability she discusses.

All in all, I recommend Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies* to anyone who would like to investigate atypical forms of visual methodology, and/or examples of critical visual research. The content – or the specific chapters – could be used as a methodological guidebook. The book is an appropriate resource for teaching at an undergraduate level, or as an introduction at higher levels. Another important and unique feature of the publication is its critical approach – however, because of the overwhelming nature of this, the book is recommended only in smaller doses.