Using Visual Sources

ACE / ECA Research Training
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- Historical Outline:
  Images as Research Tools
  Images as Sources of Information
  Images as Historical Documents

- What Images Do and Do Not Tell Us
Images have a long history of being used as research tools – presenting data and knowledge that cannot be presented in verbal form.

'Cinema expands our vision in time as the microscope has expanded it in space. It permits us to see facts which escape our senses because they pass too quickly ... it eliminates the personal factor ... All in all, a film is superior to the best description.'

Regnault (1922) 65

'Only cinema provides objective documents in abundance; thanks to cinema, the anthropologist can, today, collect the life of all peoples; he will possess in his drawers all the special acts of different races ... He will be present at feasts, battles, at religious and civil ceremonies, at different ways of trading, eating, relaxing.'

Regnault (1923) 680
Anon. - Natives of Tonga on board a sailing ship (1880's)

Anon. - Two young Fijian women, Polynesia (1890's)

Photograph of a Baule ceremonial dance in Vogel (1997)
Edweard Muybridge – Plate from *The Human Figure in Motion* (Philadelphia, 1901)

‘Dog approaching another dog with hostile intentions.’

‘The Same in a humble and affectionate frame of mind.’

‘The same caressing his master’

‘Half-bred Shepherd Dog in the same state.’

‘Chimpanzee disappointed and sulky’

‘The same, when pleased by being caressed’

‘Cynopithecus niger in a placid condition’
Art and architectural history would be unthinkable without the use of visual images – not only reproductions of artworks but also in order to create types (e.g. styles).

Expressions of (l.) disdain, contempt and disgust, and (r.) anxiety and grief.
They function as a means of providing typologies of forms, e.g. the classical orders of architecture...

...or even of Hindu architecture.

The Imaginary Museum

For Malraux (1949) the invention of photography enabled the construction of a museum-without-walls – art history is no longer dependent on the existence of actual museums.

Thus, in the past:

‘Isolated works and groups of works, even cathedral statuary, had to insinuate themselves into the artistic awareness of those who saw them for the first time, and into a company of masterworks […] But the museum without walls, thanks to the mass of works it can show us simultaneously in reproduction, frees us from the necessity of a tentative approach. By revealing a style in its entirety […] the new masterpiece is classified … not against its rivals, but as the leading member of a family.’

Malraux (1949) 23-24
‘Then, again, black-and-white photography tends to intensify the “family likeness” between objects that have but a slight affinity ... very different objects of the same epoch ... have lost their colours, texture and natural dimensions (the statue has also lost something of its volume); each, in short, has practically lost its individuality - but their common style is by so much the greater.’

Malraux (1949) 24

‘Thus the angle from which a work of sculpture is photographed, the focussing, and above all, skilfully adjusted lighting, may impart violent emphasis to something the sculptor himself merely hinted at.’

Malraux (1949) 24

‘... reproduction ... has created fictitious arts, by systematically falsifying the scale of objects; by presenting oriental seals the same size as the decorative reliefs on pillars and amulets like statues. As a result the imperfect finish of the smaller work, due to its limited dimensions, produces, in enlargement, the effect of a bold style in the modern idiom.’

Malraux (1949) 27
Images as Sources of Information

There is also a long tradition of using images as a way of providing information – from scientific diagrams to technical illustrations.

These provide certain kinds of information much more efficiently than verbal description.

As Ivins (1958) demonstrates – scientific imagery only became central following the invention of prints, when imaging became more reliable.
Imagery was central to the dissemination of modern medical and biological knowledge in the 16th and 17th century.

Plate from John Browne (1642-ca. 1702) *A compleat treatise of the muscles, as they appear in the humane body, and arise in dissection...* (London, 1681).
Giovanni Borelli (1608-79) Illustrations to Aristotle, *De Motu Animalium* (Florence, 1680)

Wax moulages from the dermatology clinic of the University of Hamburg showing (l.) herpes and (r.) acne.
Images as Historical Documents

Exekias – *Achilles and Ajax playing a game* - Athenian Black Figure Amphora (ca. 555-530 BCE)

Historical images can often be a source of information about characteristics of the culture in question (e.g. pastimes, hairstyles etc)
Images can also be an important source of information about other aspects of material culture.

When treated as historical documents what is important is not what images intentionally display (i.e. their mythic content) but what they unintentionally give away . . .

. . . such as furniture design (see the swivel chair)
Canaletto - Westminster Bridge, London, with the Lord Mayor's Procession on the Thames (1747)

Canaletto - The Thames and the City (1746-47)
Lieve Pietersz Verschuier - *Action Between the Dutch Fleet and Barbary Pirates* (circa 1670)

What Images Do and Do Not Tell Us
Anonymous – Photograph of Jean-Martin Charcot and a Patient (1875)

Charcot was well-known for the systematic study of hysteria and other neuroses – and for his images of his patients.

This images, however, tells us rather more about the status of late 19th century medicine as a social phenomenon.

Images can also be a source of ‘misinformation.’

‘... when encounters between cultures take place, each culture’s images of the other are likely to be stereotyped. The word “stereotype” (originally a plate from which an image could be printed) is ... a vivid reminder of the link between visual and mental images.’

Burke (2001) 125

At the very least they have to be recognised as shaped by the prejudices of the person producing them and the culture in which they are produced.
The first systematic critique of cultural stereotyping was (Said, 1978) but e.g. Gérôme has also had his defenders (see Mackenzie, 1995).

Jean Léon Gérôme - *Pool in a Harem* (Ca. 1876)
Jean Léon Gérôme - *The Carpet Merchant* (Ca. 1887)

The townscapes of 17th century Dutch artists seem to offer a highly faithful depiction of the urban environment.

Jan Vermeer
*Street in Delft* (c. 1657-58)
‘The doorway, the frontier between public and private zones, is the centre of interest in a number of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings ... Looking at pictures such as these it is difficult to repress the sense of viewing a snapshot, or even of entering a seventeenth-century house.’

Burke (2001) 88

But . . .

Peter de Hooch - *Courtyard of a House in Delft* (1658)

Even in the case of photography the image may be semantically charged - i.e. an idealised image or one laden with some other moral or political connotations.

Walker Evans - *Negro Church, South Carolina* (1936)
Other critics (e.g., Geertz, 1993) have argued that there is a limit to what images can observe. Many aspects of cultural behaviour are ‘unphotographable’:

‘The two movements [twitching and winking] are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-camera phenomenalistic observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast, as anyone unfortunate to have had the first taken for the second knows.’

Geertz (1993): 6
Geertz’s criticisms lead on to the wider criticism of the positivist attachment to what is immediately visible as the primary datum of knowledge.

Guy Debord, *The Naked City* (1959)

The concern of traditional art and architectural history, for example, with style is linked to an over-reliance on images at the expense of other forms of (non-visual) analysis (e.g. social history, gender analysis, psychogeography). This opens up room for general consideration of the possibilities and limitations of images.

References