

BOOK REVIEW

Images et Études Culturelles

Darras, B. (Eds.) (2008). *Images et Études Culturelles*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.

Joanna Rees

PhD student

National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan

E-mail:reesjoanna@hotmail.com.

Bernard Darras' 2008 book *Images et Études Culturelles* bridges the gap between formalist and social analyses in art education. The text presents a strong collection of European endeavors in the field of Cultural Studies, which deconstruct European and global notions contemporary social issues such as post-colonialism, feminism, and homosexuality. Through semiotic visual analysis, Darras and his contemporaries bring a unique formalist approach to social theory in visual culture and cultural studies.

Images et Études Culturelles is part of a collection of five texts by Publications de la Sorbonne which concern the study of visual images in cultural studies semiology, aesthetics, and signification. In addition to *Images et Études Culturelles*, Darras previously edited two texts in the series *Images et Sémiotique* (2006) and *Images et Sémiologie* (2008). *Images et Sémiotique* continues the examination of visual images, signification, and aesthetics that editors Anne Beyaert-Geslin and Christophe Genin's established in the first two books of the series (2006) *L'image Entre Sens et Signification* and (2007) *Images et Esthétique*. *Images et Sémiotique* connects ways of constructing semiotic knowledge from the methodological

practices of *peirciennes* studies or the study of signage, the methodology of inquiry, and studies of cognitive semiotics.

Similarly to *Images et Sémiologie*, the text *Images et Sémiologie* presents contemporary research on the semiotic structure of visual images from nine scholars, (Bernard Darras, Nicole Everaert-Desmedt, Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, Anne Beyaert, Georges Roque, Jan Baetens, Michel Costantini, Emmanuel Souchier, and Nathalie Roelens). The text's scholarship is divided into three areas: political imagery through the studies of Everaert-Desmedt and Fresnault-Deruelle, intertextual analysis of fine art works such as Roque's study of Vincent Van Gogh's 1889 Self Portrait with Bandaged Ear, and research using modern hermeneutic approaches in analyzing historical works of art by Giotto and photography by Edgar Degas. Moreover the text contains a noteworthy article by Darras, *Sémiotiques des signes visuels et du design de l'information*, which examines the hermeneutic semiotic structure present in the gendered labeling of public toilet signage.

Overall, the collection of five texts by Publications de la Sorbonne are significant as they demonstrate new thinking in semiotics, visual analysis, politics, cognition, and cultural studies which merge the formal and social approach of analyzing visual culture. In the introduction to *Images et Études Culturelles* Darras describes the evolution of the field of Cultural Studies. He argues there is often a conflict in the constriction of meaning and interpretation within the field. This is made more complicated by the mixed messages present in visual media. Cultural Studies researchers deconstruct taboos and phobias expressed in the dominant Western culture through political and semiotic critiques of visual culture and visual documents. In the text Darras debates the definition of Cultural Studies, which he finds is influenced by the fields of sociology and anthropology.

Review of *Images et Études Culturelles*

In the text's first article, Darras explores the othering of native Zimbabwe culture through contemporary tourist postcards in his article

BOOK REVIEW

Identité, authenticité et alérité. Darras' study analyzes messages present in mass-culture through a naturalist visual critique. The African images signify primitive notions and stand as a cultural symbol. The postcards were intended to be purchased as souvenirs for tourists. Darras argues individuals who purchased the postcards did so because they represented their post-colonial values through stereotyped depictions of Africans as savages. Ironically, Darras reveals the postcards proclaim to be supporting the people of Zimbabwe. The postcard implies part of their profits will go to a charitable donation and are printed on recycled paper. Through his analyses Darras questions the true legitimacy of the images and their reason for being created. His study brings to light racism in current postcolonial visual culture.

Luke Gartland Chercheur's article *The Orientalism of the French Empire. : the Case of Execution Without Judgment on the Royal Moorish Henri Regnault* describes the work of painter Henri Regnault who painted grisly scenes of death. Regnault's paintings have oriental references that refer to post-colonial values and politics. Chercheur argues the work of other French painters such as Eugene Delacroix contains evidence of visual codes of orientalism. In pre-revolutionary France court life served to illustrate the complex political environment of colonialism.

Jean-Pierre Esquenazi's article *The Sociological Interpretation of the Image* questions the complexity in interpreting visual images. He examines an unknown photographic representation and proceeds to engage in visual analysis. Esquenazi asks how spectators come to understand an image. He argues images have the dual status of referencing social and pictorial values. Images have logic and there are certain traits which distinguish certain genres such as portraiture. Images are received based on social values. To distinguish interpretations we have to consider the distinction of how images are perceived.

Ginetter Verstraete's article *Diaspora and Interactivity in the work of Keith Piper* examines the postcolonial diaspora present in the work of multimedia artist Keith Piper. Piper's work confronts historical and cultural

history through image movement. Verstraete explores the exhibit's relationship within the artist's body of work. Verstraete argues the moving image is designed to evoke thinking that is unique and often very different from that of traditional postcolonial theorists. Most theories concerning the diaspora evoke the concepts of race and ethnicity to highlight the inherent experiences of current mobility in the world. Verstraete concludes that in the footsteps of others we find traces of ourselves. Piper's work features a message on the interactive physical dislocations of the artist and modern technology. What remains is a space between identity, new media, gender, race, and society.

Christopher Genin's article *Tags and Graff* describes the contemporary art form of graffiti which uses new terminologies to describe its graphic visual style. Graffiti tags present problems in how to analyze the image. According to Genin reading graffiti is best done by considering the socioeconomic status of the graffiti artist, the history of the artwork, and reflecting on the economic interests of the global market.

Jan Baetens' article *Another story: Lessons of the form in the Spanish comic book history* argues that comic book readings inspire the field of Cultural Studies and question the genres legitimacy in the fine arts tradition. Baetens' visual readings focus on reading the image over text. Baetens also considers cultural and aesthetic differences with comics originating from America, Europe, or elsewhere in the world. Comic books inspire dialogue between the disciplines of art history, literature, history, fine arts, and Cultural Studies. In addition, the visual presentation of comic books reference illusion, speech, form, and imagination. Baetens concludes comic book readings extend beyond the walls of the university and Cultural Studies.

Marie-Helene Bourcier's article *Notes for analysis the cultural feminist and pro-sex feminist in the photograph Anatomy of a Pin-up Photo by Annie Sprinkle* debates the readings, concepts, and analysis of images in Cultural Studies. Since their emergence in the 1970s feminists cultural scholars have noted differences of sexuality or gender through pictorial representation. This

BOOK REVIEW

applies to both the production of images and their reception. In regards to feminist criticism in the 1990s, the image resulted from the technological genres that determined its ideals of gender norms. In our current mass-media notions of masculinity and femininity are repeated constantly to exist and determine the prevailing gender values.

Overall, *Images et Études Culturelles* is a worthwhile text which connects thinking cultural studies, semiology, social theory, and aesthetics. Darras collection is especially relevant considering recent debates in the field concerning social theory and visual culture. Contemporary educators can learn from the outlook of Darras through the application of formal analysis with social theory in visual culture art education.

Reference

BOOK REVIEW

- Anne, B. G. (Eds.) (2006). *L'image Entre Sens et Signification*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.
- Darras, B. (Eds.) (2006). *Images et Sémiotique*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.
- Darras, B. (Eds.) (2008). *Images et Études Culturelles*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.
- Darras, B. (Eds.) (2008). *Images et Sémiologie*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.
- Genin, C. (Eds.) (2007). *Images et Esthétique*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.