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Seeing Things: Visual Research and Material Culture

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INTRODUCTION

How we think about material culture goes hand in hand with how we think about culture, and it also shapes how we approach visual studies of culture and social life. As I will explore below, these definitional matters are also matters of theory. Propositions about the relationship of culture, materiality and visibility implicate ideas about how people live, what they care about, who they are, what they see and how they look.

Many sociologists, anthropologists and lay communities think of material culture as the physical artifacts of a particular group of people. This 'world of things' includes foodstuffs, clothing, tools, family photographs, decorative beadwork or tattoos, religious regalia and relics, drugs, server farms, home and office furnishings – and the homes and offices themselves – dolls, toys, armaments, automobiles and much more.

To the extent that they are material, bounded and accessible, these manifestations of material culture can become interesting objects of visual inquiry. We can understand quite well, for example, the value of visual studies of the materials involved in food preparation and consumption (Pepin, 1976; Lifchez and Winslow, 1979), marriage or funeral practices (Norfleet, 1979; Secretan, 1995), dairy farming (Harper, 2001), timber harvesting (Rieger, 2003), electoral campaigns, or imprisonment (Lyon, 1971; Jackson, 1977).

As an implicit complement to the world of things, both scholars and lay audiences also affirm the significance of symbolic, non-material dimensions of culture and social life. Depending on discipline or disposition, these non-material elements can include how people think about their history, time and place, the universe, children and adults, work, play, life and death, family and community. Ideals for judging beauty, fairness, power, religiosity and other such matters also fall within this non-material realm, as do typologies by which people sort out flora and

fauna, kinship, political persuasions, what can and cannot be owned, and so on.

These forms of ideation cannot be observed directly, but they can be inferred from what people say, what they do and the materials they work with. Through interactive image-making and interview strategies (Collier, 1967; Spindler, 1987; Hoskins, 1998; Clark, 1999; Clark-Ibanez, 2009) visual research methods can also play an important role in helping to construct such inferences from both researcher and subject points of view.

In the last few decades, the vitality of these complementary orientations has fueled an expanded appreciation of material culture and an enhanced role for visual studies in investigating culture and social life. In the remainder of this chapter, I will review some of these developments and implications. But one notable implication, to my way of thinking, is that the terms 'material culture' and 'visual studies' may not provide the best framework for guiding empirical research in this area, for at least three reasons:

First, the broad bifurcation of cultural studies into material and non-material domains has too often neglected how members of a culture act and behave, individually and in consort with others. Attending to what people actually do – as social, psychological and physical beings that embody cultural practices –blurs boundaries between things and ideas, the material and non-material, the visual and non-visual (Bronner, 1986). As a special instance of this ambiguity, the human body appears as a significant 'material' for the production and distribution of culture and corporeal behavior as an important, but frequently neglected, domain of material culture (Bell, 2009).

Secondly, by granting primacy to visual appearances, visual studies of material culture have often played a powerful role in disconnecting artifacts from the social and physical environments meaningful to their original makers and users. This disassociation both reflects and enables the commoditization of cultural materials for distribution and exchange within exogenous markets – markets in which even products and artifacts of social research can be appropriated for ulterior purposes. Recent controversies over legal attribution and control of cultural materials highlight the shortcomings of analyses that presume clear and stable divides between visual/material cultural forms and the social and contexts of their origins and first use (Messenger, 1999; Lessig, 2004; Scafidi, 2005; Cuno, 2008; Lilley, 2008).

Thirdly, new technologies of multi-media representation have generated a host of virtual locations, situations, transactions, relationships and other culturally significant phenomena that are poorly accounted for by traditional perspectives on material culture and visual studies. Indeed, in their potential to link cultural ideas and things through visual inspection and touch-based interaction, virtual reality (VR) objects and environments have stimulated changes in how we talk about and see the world. References to being 'online' or 'off,' for example, or 'reading' audio books and podcasts, 'talking' with someone through online chat, 'going' to or 'visiting' websites, writing or reading on Facebook® 'walls,' and so on, stand some characteristic distinctions of material culture and visual study on their heads.

After reviewing several different orientations to material culture and their limitations in addressing these and other concerns, I will propose three propositions about culture, materiality, visibility and methods of visual research that are hopefully more useful in guiding visual research in this area. While these propositions blur the commonsense distinction between ideas and things, understanding that distinction at face value is an important step towards assessing contributions of visual research to the study of material culture. With that in mind, things are by far the best place to begin.

ARTIFACTS AND OTHER CULTURAL MATERIALS

Compared to other noteworthy orientations, artifacts have been the stars of the material

culture show. Both scholars and lay audiences are wowed by physical objects that people have fashioned or re-fashioned to support their culture and their lives. Museum collections and exhibitions, films and videotape documentaries, and photography-rich books lend a continuing vitality to this orientation towards material culture. It's part of what we appreciate in Franz Boas' analysis of primitive art (1955), the King Tut exhibition (Edwards, 1976) once again making the rounds of notable museums, Patricia Turner's (2009) thoughtful analysis of African-American Quilters and Errol Morris' (2009) blogs about fake photographs.

Artifact-oriented studies can play an important role in alerting scholars and lay audiences to information and materials they otherwise know little about – or misunderstand: Impressionist paintings, for example, or the houses architects live in (Plumb, 1977), product histories of automobiles, electrical virility devices (de la Pena, 2005), Boy Scout uniforms (Mechling, 2001), or Pez dispensers (Chertoff and Kahn, 2006). Of particular interest in this regard are studies that document artifacts associated with a particular time, people and place, such as Tom Wolfe's (1965) impressionistic, but well-researched, essays about custom car culture in the mid-twentieth century and Lynn White's (1966) scholarly exegesis of the stirrup in fourteenth-century France. A convenience sample of artifact studies from my personal library might include the following:

- Erving Goffman's (1976) catalog and analysis of advertising photographs depicting male and female subjects.
- David Anthony's *The Lost World of Old Europe* (2010), a provocative history of early civilizations in the Balkans.
- Three volumes of *The Bowyer's Bible* (Hamm, 1992, 1993, 1994), an edited collection of illustrated essays about bows and arrows created and used by different peoples around the world.
- A narrative catalog of John Baeder's paintings of diners from various locales across the United States (1995).
- Volume 1 of the *1980 Scott's Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue* (Hatcher, 1979) that identifies all known stamps of the United States, United Nations and British Commonwealth of Nations by the year they were issued, face value and retail value in 1980.
- Dozens of illustrated cookbooks.
- Robert Coles' (1992) account of the drawings that children prepared during meetings with him as a therapist/interlocutor.
- Dana Salvo's (1997) photographs of home altars in Mexico.
- David Levinthal's photographic study of the 1950s children's playsets made by Louis Marx and T. Cohn (1996).
- An illustrated history of the Airstream trailer written by Burkhurt and Hunt (2000).
- The *Isn't S/He a Doll?* catalog of an exhibition of African dolls at the Fowler Anthropology Museum, UCLA (Cameron, 1966).
- Peter Menzel's (1994) masterful photographic illustration of the contrasting life goods of families in 30 different countries: *Material World*.

The boundary between enthusiast and professional scholarship is unclear in many artifact studies, in part because of the broad aesthetic draw of the artifacts themselves. The same dynamic that brings both scholars and school children to museums can engage diverse audiences for other multi-media representations: movies and television programming, heritage villages and craft workshops, and cultural re-enactments. Within both scholarly and popular perspectives, there is also broad recognition of the artifact as a class of objects that reflects substantial value added to its constituent materials. This recognition recapitulates Levi-Strauss' attention to the moieties of 'raw' and 'cooked', enshrines the cultural significance of the artifact over raw materials and acknowledges tensions between the two as a key signpost for reading a culture's particularities.

The significance of an artifact for social and cultural studies, however, may correspond only in part – or not at all – to its visual apprehension as a discrete, material object, for several reasons. First, boundaries

between raw materials and fabricated objects may be more relative than absolute. Some of my own 'food' books, for example, include nothing but ingredients, others nothing but individual dishes, and others still menus for special dinners and festivals.

Secondly, the significance of objects, materials and their origins varies both within and across cultures (see Figure 4.1). Artifacts can be regarded quite differently by community members and outsiders, and within the same group, materials may carry different meanings for people who produce artifacts and for those who only distribute or consume them (Becker, 1986). In general, the knowledge and skills that people bring to material objects make them more or less meaningful, not just for different cultural groups but even to the same person at different points in time (Kasten, 1987; Fisherkeller, 1997; McDonough, 1999).

As a third complication, material artifacts can be used for purposes other than those intended by their originators, makers or designers (Goffman, 1961; Bronner, 1999). One person's high-quality skipping stone could be appropriated by someone else to mark a path, offer a prayer, scare away a pest, or cool a warm forehead. The cell phone used to call home by one person might be used by another to detonate an explosive device, or to surreptitiously acquire confidential information. The cookbook that one person consults for recipes can be used by another to complete a collection, to remember the family member from whom it was inherited, or to raise the seat of a chair high enough for a child to sit at the dinner table.

Many artifacts of material culture travel well and are photogenic enough to be referred to in exhibition advertisements as 'treasures,' 'wonders' and 'exquisite examples of' a

AQ: Please provide Figures 4.1 & 4.2.

AQ2: I have a picture of two Japanese workers making a tatami mat: confirm that is Figure 4.1

Figure 4.1 Artifacts associated with one culture can be appropriated by people from another and put to use in ways that have little if anything to do with their original significance – as in this black-and- white photograph purchased for $2.00 from a vendor's 'Ethnic/Culture' collection at an 'All Image Show' in Emeryville, California, April 2010. Unknown photographer

distinctive art, craft or technological tradition. When compared to ideas alone, discrete objects of this sort can make culture more visible and, purportedly, more 'real.' Taken apart or looked at on their own, however, material objects have the potential to detach theorizing about culture and social life from actual cultures and social lives.

With these considerations in mind, the ideal of seeing an entire world through a handful of pottery shards – or a beaded vest, funerary figurine, stained glass window, map of the world, courtier's or campaign consultant's handbook, family photograph or Hollywood film – is not only ambitious, it's problematic. Shards, maps, books, photos or films may prove rich subjects for visual study. Absent other kinds of evidence, however, the pictures they create of culture and social life are not only incomplete but also potentially misleading. Some of these shortcomings can be addressed by examining artifacts within contexts of significance that extend beyond their purely physical and visual attributes – contexts, for example, such as technology and social life.

TECHNOLOGY

Defined loosely as the constellation of resources, tools, techniques and strategies necessary to accomplish something (Mumford, 1963; Ellul, 1964), technologies bring together some of the materials and ideas that characterize culture and social life and provide a functional context within which artifacts, other materials and behavior are logically coordinated. While a plastered house may be an intriguing object of inquiry, so too are the social, material and technical arrangements necessary to produce or repair it, some of which are visible for the New Mexico home pictured in Figure 4.2.

A technology orientation to material culture dims the brightness of artifact stars and directs more attention towards the material and social arrangements through which artifacts are produced. This blurs considerably the distinction – paramount in the artifact orientation – between materials that are found, cultivated or fabricated. In doing so, it also blurs distinctions between materials, ideas and behavior, in particular the manual dexterity, athleticism and coordination that support craft, fabrication and design (Bronner, 1986). Though some viewers may marvel at the intricate detail visible in a figurine, basket, dance step, computer program, or computer chip, others may direct their wonder at the technologies, physical skills and social strategies that made those details possible.

Technology orientations to material culture are less common than examinations of artifacts on their own, but several intriguing studies point the way towards continued research value. Notable visual studies of food technology, for example, include Deborah Barndt's (1997) cross-national study of tomato production, Doug Harper's (2001) study of regional dairy farming and Harper and Patrizia Faccioli's (2010) study of Italian meals – all of which foreground photographs and analysis of artifacts within different, and quite varied, production contexts.

Another exemplar is provided by Patricia Greenfield's (2004) longitudinal study of Maya weaving in Chiapas Mexico. Through archival records, detailed observation and photographic recording that span several decades, Greenfield documented how the means and significance of weaving production evolved from one generation of adolescent apprentices to the next. The photographs of woven fabrics that appear in the book based on this research are beautiful in their own right, but Greenfield's focus is less on their significance and aesthetic qualities as artifacts than on how visible differences in materials and artifacts correspond to changes in the social and cultural scheme of production and a shift from collective towards individual creativity.

Two other visual studies illustrate the extremely broad range of material phenomena that can be examined within a

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Figure 4.2 Fabricating artifacts typically involves materials, tools, craft knowledge, bodies and some form of social organization. Original caption: 'Spanish-American women replastering an adobe house. This is done once a year'. Chamisal, New Mexico. Photograph by Russell Lee. US Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information

AQ1: In *Constructing the Super Bowl*, Dona Schwartz (1998) and her colleagues' but *Contesting the Super Bowl*, Dona Schwartz (1998) in References. Please clarify

technology framework. In *Constructing the Super Bowl*, Dona Schwartz (1998) and her colleagues provide a visually rich account of the varied elements that contributed to the 1992 Super Bowl held in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Once again, many interesting materials are featured in photographs appearing in the book. Rather than celebrate, critique or affirm these as individual artifacts, however, the author's commentary examines how different materials, arrangements and imagery were articulated in constructing and memorializing a spectacle of local, national and global dimensions.

Yet another intriguing application of the technology orientation to material culture is the 'Director's Cut' commentary that Michael Apted made in conjunction with his film, *42 Up*, one of seven films in the 'Up' series that documented the changing lives of a dozen or so Britons. Apted examined the films themselves (and individual scenes within them) for what they portrayed, but he also commented on the films as a kind of raw material that became meaningful within the construction of his life and the lives of his subjects. In contrast to film scholars and historians who might consider the films as artifacts alone, Apted's exegesis is more attuned to the human and social contexts in which he and his subjects were collaborators in the technology of film production (Wagner, 2007).

All of these studies position artifacts within contexts of production, use and appreciation by members of their culture of origin. In each case, visual questions about what an artifact 'looks like' are complemented with substantive questions about how artifacts are made and used. And, for the examples I've noted,

at least some dimensions of the latter are examined by making or acquiring photographic or videographic records.

This notion of documenting technologies (and their attendant skills, craft and materials) through visual recording has expanded rapidly with the growth of digital media and associated Internet distribution systems such as YouTube®, iTunes[1] and Vimeo™. These increasingly visible folk practices strike some chords that echo the enduring research value of this approach (Mead and Bateson, 1977; Mead, 1995). If we want to know how Ishi used a bow and arrow, we can learn something from the photographs and motion pictures that Alfred and Theodora Kroeber had the foresight to make of him doing just that (Kroeber, 2002). In terms of the studies noted above, much the same can be said for milking cows, producing the Super Bowl, weaving and making a film. As a result of a rapidly developing videographic folk culture, we can now also catch glimpses of countless other materials and technologies as they are recorded and posted online to broad public access.

As a context for understanding material artifacts – and as a framework for the analysis of material culture in general – technology directs attention to how design decisions, the social organization of effort and attention, craft and performance skills and material resources are articulated with the processes of production. This articulation can help account for why a material object might take the form it does within a particular culture or local application.

While this emphasis on production and purpose can be helpful, it reflects three enduring challenges for visual studies of material culture. First, it requires some understanding of the multiple purposes and intentions that guide production cycles for different cultural groups. Secondly, it requires access and observations of the activities – including subtle handcrafts and social relations that are difficult enough to notice, let alone document – through which relatively raw materials become artifacts. Thirdly, with its emphasis on goal-directed and utilitarian behavior, technology accounts may neglect the expressive and playful qualities of both activities and arranged materials.

The first two challenges can be addressed somewhat through intimate familiarity and the exercise of expert observation and recording skills, but the third questions whether technology is the most appropriate way to think about play, art, and other activities that include significant expressive and improvisational elements (Mumford, 1963; Bateson, 1972; Huizinga, 1976; Schechner, 1993). As Miller puts it, 'Play involves a relative autonomy of means. Ends are not obliterated, but they don't, as in some other modes of organization, determine the means' (1973: 92).

MATERIALS-THAT-MATTER

One way to move beyond the limitations of an artifact or technology emphasis is to explore material culture in terms of the 'materials-that-matter' to particular subject populations (see Figure 4.3). This is a promising approach, as even small steps in this direction encourage the recognition that materials may matter to different people for different reasons and in quite different ways (Bronner, 1986; Miller, 1998).

Visual studies that focus on artifacts or technologies can miss complexities of this sort and support distortions that keep them hidden. This potential shortcoming takes on added significance when the content of such studies crosses cultural boundaries. By tying images of things too closely to familiar categories, classes and captions – dolls, for example, or child care, families, homes, celebrations, entertainment, religion, sports, natural disasters, terrorists, dying – visual studies can narrow, as well as broaden, our understanding of culture and social life.

Some visual field study strategies can play an iterative role in helping to reduce or avoid these potential pitfalls and missteps. Visual

Figure 4.3 Figurines, toys and stones are attached to this car in a folk culture remake of mass culture materials. While displays of this sort clearly reflect materials-that-matter, they can be difficult to account for fully within technology orientations to material culture. © 2010 Jon Wagner

researchers can make photographs or videotapes of materials and behavior, for example, and then invite subjects to propose their own categories or concepts for classification and analysis (Clark, 1999; Hethorn and Kaiser, 1999; Radley, 2009). They can also invite subjects to make photographs, videotapes, drawings or other visual figures according to their own lights or in response to shooting scripts provided by the researcher (Chalfen, 1981; Rich and Chalfen, 1999; Luttrell, 2003; Salazar, 2008; Clark-Ibanez, 2009). Researchers can also examine photographs and video recordings that subjects make as evidence about how those subjects see their own world (Bellman and Jules-Rosett, 1977; Lesy, 1980; Chalfen, 1987; Halle, 1993; Koltyk, 1993; Ruby, 1995; Lustig, 2004). All three approaches have proved valuable in collecting information from subjects about their surroundings, behavior, technologies and concerns. Each can also be useful in eliciting information about materials-that-matter and their significance within the world view of an individual or group.

In general, sorting out how things matter to people is more complicated than determining if they matter at all, or if they matter more than other things to which they might be compared, but visual research methods can help refine this kind of significance as well. If data recording is limited to the choice itself, asking individuals to select photographs of things that might matter will not get the researcher very far. However, asking subjects to talk about their choices, or to sort

and organize images of objects into arrays that reflect functional or symbolic relationships, can be more productive (Clark, 1999; Rich and Chalfen, 1999). If photos of a knife, food processor, stove and countertop are clustered together by an informant, for example, we know something different than if they are sorted into two or three groups, one of which also includes photos of a freezer, community garden, supermarket or best friend.

Some might argue that explicating subject accounts and categories – the emic, or insider, point of view – is the sine qua non of good fieldwork. But that position neglects the possibility that subjects could misrepresent their point of view (deliberately or not), be confused or forgetful, or have mixed priorities and sentiments. When someone reports that the most important implement in her or his kitchen is the stove, knife or counter top, does this signify how the item functions within the technology of cooking, the status accorded to different household possessions, or the pleasures of associated social activities? Similar questions are worth asking about subject claims that other things matter: a pair of ear rings or a nose piercing, family photographs, a nearby pond or stream, proximity to a bus stop or delicatessen, the length of a lover's hair or employee's résumé, and so on.

Even if a researcher is lucky and persistent enough to get a good account of such complexities, 'the native point of view' may be necessary but not sufficient to answer important questions about culture and social life (Geertz, 1983). To keep in view those elements that subjects deny, ignore are not in a position to see, or simply don't care about, researchers need to do something more than provide a good account of the subjects' world view, however valuable that may be.

MATERIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

One way of extending the 'materials-that-matter' orientation beyond dimensions of culture and social life that natives notice and care about is to include the researcher as an additional subject who is also a member of one or more non-native populations. For most researchers, one such population is constituted by an investigative profession or academic discipline. This conceit avoids arbitrary attributions of privilege and authority to the researcher in representing the 'outside' or etic point of view. It affirms instead the value of exploring two emic points of view: one representing the research subject or native point of view, and another that of the researcher and her or his colleagues.

This extension of the materials-that-matter orientation has both general and specific implications. One of the latter is that for communities of scholars who conduct empirical social research, the material circumstances of natural phenomena matter a great deal. This is the case not only for physical and natural scientists but also for social scientists, most of whom become uneasy when research reports stray too far from evidence – or at least illustrations – of particular people doing specific things in particular places. Among social researchers, these concerns about empirical evidence reflect an implicit but abiding interest in the materiality of culture and social life. Visual research methods can be of inestimable value in examining this kind of materiality and camerawork a key technical strategy in that regard.

As a special case of this potential, photographs and video recordings can be used to create a visibility baseline against which to plot and highlight what subjects and researcher actually notice (Collier, 1967; Menzel, 1994). A photograph or videotape of preparing or eating a meal, for example – or conducting a meeting, religious ritual, or athletic contest – can provide an account of everything visible that could matter to participants in that event. These material circumstances can be compared with specific features singled out by subjects for comment or special attention. They can also be

compared with materials regarded by the researcher as important for their latent or manifest functions. The photographs thus provide an optically etic account of the meal, but also serve as a record of material circumstances of special interest to subjects and researchers within their different insider (emic) points of view.

In many respects, even the 'machine recording' of images owes much to the cultural perspective of the photographer or videographer who operates the machine. Cameras do not take pictures on their own, and photographs and videotape recordings are shaped by a multitude of operator decisions about where to point the camera, when to begin and end a recording, settings for focus and lighting, and so on. In another sense, however, the term is not that far off the mark, for cameras do not pick and choose among the details visible within their field of view. In that respect, these increasingly small machines enable people to create detailed visual records of natural phenomena – including features that camera operators may not be aware of at the time – that would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to create in any other way.

As illustrated by Figure 4.4(a) and (b), the potential to articulate subject, researcher and visibly etic perspectives extends to social and cultural activities much larger in scale for both time and place: constructing or destroying a community, for example, or developing a service economy, mining diamonds or mechanizing farm work, waging a ground war or advertising campaign, reducing or increasing income inequality, and so on. These large-scale events, transitions and developments also take place within a distinctive constellation of material circumstances. Some of these circumstances are more visible than others, and some of greater or lesser significance – symbolically or functionally – to different participants. Photographic and videographic studies have much to offer here as well, and in much the same way that they can help account for and explicate the material culture of small-scale events.

Explication and analysis of material circumstances in these broad terms reflect central concerns of social and human ecology. As outlined initially by sociologists Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess (1921), and subsequently by Roderick McKenzie (Hawley, 1968) and Amos Hawley (1986), this perspective seeks to understand the obvious, but indeterminate interdependence of the physical, material environment with culture and social life. The origins of this approach during the early twentieth century were tied closely to urban sociology and the intellectual and political challenges of trying to manage city life and its environs. But social and human ecology has also found continuing and vital expressions within geography, ecology and community development as well as in some strands of sociology and anthropology.

The materials that matter to researchers within this perspective go well beyond artifacts and technologies, narrowly defined, to include environmental features that facilitate or constrain culture and social life. A mountain ridge, broad plain or dry stream bed may have both functional and symbolic significance in demarcating cultural boundaries, transportation routes and meeting places. Good soil or bad may encourage the growth of good or bad grapes, housing developments, or mud play (deMarrais et al., 1992), but wine industries, housing developments and children's recreational facilities can also enrich or degrade the soil or water, and do so in ways that those living and working around such facilities might not notice on their own. Visual studies of material culture, broadly defined, can help articulate these material and subjective realities within which culture and social life take shape.

IMAGERY AND OTHER FEATURES OF VISUAL STUDIES

Some parallels and contrasts between the orientations to material culture described

(a)

(b)

Figure 4.4a and 4.4b Berlin's Brandenburg Gate in 1984 (a) and the same view in 2001 (b). The comparison reveals that some key landmarks from a divided Berlin remain but the texture of their surroundings has been transformed, stimulating and reflecting changes in the social ecology of Berlin and the life of Berliners. Figure 4.4a © 1984 Jon Wagner and Figure 4.4b © 2001 Adrian Graham. Reproduced with permission

Table 4.1 Four orientations to material culture

Comparative dimensions	*Orientations*			
	Artifacts	*Technology*	*Materials-that-matter*	*Materiality*
Primary focus of inquiry	Products and tools of cultural practice	Cultural productions and associated materials, tools, strategies and outcomes	Materials that subjects notice and regard as significant for whatever reason	Material foundations of culture and social life
Vernacular question	What are these things and what do they mean?	What materials and tools do these people use to accomplish x, y or z?	What materials do these people care about and why?	What interaction effects characterize these people and their physical environment?
Primary contexts of analysis	Index objects to where they were found, acquired, used and relative to other objects similar in form	Index objects within cycle or circuit of cultural production and relative to objects with related functions	Index objects to perceptual and symbolic world of subjects	Index objects to social/ physical ecology and relative to other populations and locales
Archetype disciplines	Archaeology and art history	Ethnography, bio-engineering	Ethnography, cultural studies, market research	Ethnology and human ecology

above are summarized in Table 4.1. The artifact approach has achieved its greatest intellectual refinement in connection with archaeology and art history. Technology, as a context for examining material culture, has been most fully developed within ethnographic work, ecology, history (Mumford, 1963; White, 1966) and in various specialized applications of kinesics and systems analysis. The materials-that-matter perspective is most likely to get its due in certain forms of ethnography, sociology and market research (Seiter, 1993). The materiality orientation has a home among researchers who work as ethnologists, human/social ecologists and some geographers and historians.

Boundaries between these different perspectives are somewhat fluid and ill defined. In designing and conducting a specific study, however, researchers face the challenge of aligning questions about the phenomena they are interested in with the most appropriate, productive and feasible of potential research methods. It would be going too far to say that the artifact, technology and materiality orientations each go handinhand with a distinctive research approach, but they typically lead researchers to somewhat different units of observation, data collection and data analysis. Some of these differences carry over into how research is reported, distributed and codified. Many reflect, support or depend on different kinds of visual evidence, including products of different kinds of camerawork.

At least one thoughtful scholar (Banks, 1998) has argued that visual studies, visual anthropology in particular, is nothing more and nothing less than the visual study of material culture. This point is extremely well taken, but falls short of accounting for significant differences of history and trajectory. Material culture studies have been shaped profoundly by archaeological practice, artifact collections, and principles of organization that reflect an abiding distinction between material and non-material culture. This orientation emphasizes elements of culture that are materially durable enough to

survive the passage of time – writing over speech, for example, or pottery over eating routines and costumes over dance steps.

Conversely, visual studies have been shaped by photographers, videographers and artists attuned to what is visible and, beyond that, visually interesting. This emphasis can neglect elements of culture that are not visible or hidden from view – or that are visually uninteresting. However, it adds the prospect of making durable records, through photo of videographic recording, of activities and actions that material culture scholarship has typically neglected – for example, conversations, storytelling, dance, rituals, work and play routines, gatherings, and other events.

These differences do not pit material culture scholars against visual studies scholars, but they do suggest that the two approaches overlap only in part. A more complete picture appears by examining specifically the objects and methods of inquiry linked most closely with visual studies, several of which are described elsewhere in this handbook. A shortlist of visual objects of inquiry, for example, would include at least the following:

- Visually interesting materials and activities.
- How people see the world.
- How people live, including ethnographic accounts of how the world looks to them and how they look to each other and to outsiders.
- Visual representations, including imagery, sign and symbol systems.

As a complement and extension of these objects of inquiry, visual studies scholars have developed and practiced a variety of visual study methods. These are hardly doctrinaire, but key approaches would include at least the following, several of which are described more fully elsewhere in this handbook:

- artifact acquisition and analysis
- photo and video documentation
- researcher-guided image-elicitation protocols
- image-based ethnography
- neuropsychological studies of visual perception
- formal analyses of imagery and other visual representations.

Discrete elements of these visual studies methods may appear or disappear at any stage of a research process. Beyond that, self-defined visual studies approaches may or may not emphasize the visual phenomenal world of research subjects, and if they do, that may or may not involve the use of visual research materials and methods. Some of the methods listed above are also functionally interdependent – i.e. independent variables associated with one can appear as dependent variables in another.

As a matter of some consequence for the development of both visual studies and material culture studies, several of the methods listed above correspond closely to folk practices that are widely distributed within and across contemporary cultures. This is very much the case for collecting and analyzing artifacts, making photo and video documents and using visual imagery to ask people questions. While these approaches are critically important to material culture and visual studies scholarship, they are also part and parcel of how individuals, groups and institutions go about creating, processing and arranging elements of their own culture and social life. In conjunction with new media technologies and social networking resources, they also reflect an increasingly vital dimension of modern life.

As yet another consequential matter, these same three approaches also correspond closely to the skills by which many empirical researchers acquire and manage research materials – whether or not their studies have anything to do with visual studies and material cultural perspectives. The artifacts that researchers acquire and analyze are usually referred to as 'data.' Their photo and video documentation activities are shaped by scientific instrumentation and photocopying, and their use of 'researcher-guided image-elicitation strategies' is a familiar feature of research and teaching presentations that

make use of PowerPoint® slides, charts and graphs, statistical tables, and so on. Though they hold special interest for visual studies scholars, the visual study skills associated with these three methods in particular – and those linked to formal analysis of visual representations as well – are integral to the conduct of scholarship in general.

These last two observations point to an implicit parallel between studies of material culture and visual studies: the boundaries of both orientations are blurred, on the one hand, by evolving folkways and technologies of cultural acquisition and production, and on the other, by the mechanics and evolving technologies of empirical research. This parallel suggests a kinship between visual studies and material culture that could support productive, collaborative research. However, it can also stimulate questions about the value of visual studies and material culture as theoretical frameworks for guiding empirical inquiry. Are those terms necessary and informative or do they distract scholars from more productive ways of thinking about research related to culture, imagery, materials and the visible? And, if material culture and visual studies do provide distractions of that sort, what other terms could guide researchers in their stead?

PROBLEMS, PROPOSITIONS, QUALIFICATIONS AND PROSPECTS

The observations and commentaries above suggest that the terms 'material culture' and 'visual studies' serve as a kind of shorthand for a constellation of relationships between culture and social life, on the one hand, and an array of visual research questions, methods and reporting formats, on the other. This shorthand is useful in distinguishing approaches that acknowledge the cultural significance of materials, visual imagery, visual perception, and so on, from those that neglect or trivialize them. As a guide for the design and assessment of social scientific research, however, the same terms are somewhat problematic and encourage two key distortions.

The first distortion is to think of 'material' and 'non-material' culture as discrete phenomenal domains rather than the relative availability of empirical evidence. The material/non-material distinction may be useful to an archaeologist in characterizing surviving evidence of prior cultural activity, for example, but it does not follow that cultural representations for which evidence did not survive – gesture, dance, speech, or storytelling – are non-material. In effect, taking the separation of material and non-material culture at face value divides the phenomenon of culture itself along lines that have more to do with the availability or lack of empirical evidence than with the materiality of cultural representations.

It's worth noting, for example, that the kind of material evidence researchers care about varies not only with the questions they ask but also with evolving technologies of cultural production and distribution. Prior to the growth of visual recording media, for example, few empirical traces were available for some activities – including rituals, conversation, gatherings and other forms of embodied expression and conduct – for which many are available now. It's also worth noting that the phenomenon of culture is constituted by the marriage of materials and ideas, not their divorce, even if the latter defines abiding challenges of empirical inquiry.

A more precise framework for guiding material culture studies would locate material dimensions of a culture relative to each other and in consort with their significance to both members and researchers. Within a framework of this sort, different constellations of meaning, technology and history could be delimited by multiple subjects and researchers. Ideally, bodies and costumes, landscapes and paths, materials and materials in use, ideas and things would all get their due. Starting from the assumption of a material/non-material divide makes this unlikely at best.

Dividing culture into visible and non-visible forms supports parallel distortions. On the visible side, this clumps together all elements of culture and social life that might be visible – and useful to researchers conducting a study – with those elements that are visually meaningful and useful to members of the culture being studied. On the non-visible side, it simultaneously confounds what can't be seen with what has not yet been noticed – for lack of attention, access, or adequate theory.

A more precise framework for guiding visual studies would include at least three overlapping domains: all elements of a culture that are materially visible (whether or not subjects or researchers find them interesting); a subset of visible elements noticed and noted by researchers as significant for understanding the culture in question (whether or not they are regarded as such by members themselves); and another subset of elements noticed and noted by cultural members as significant to their phenomenal world. Yet a fourth dimension can exist when members of a culture 'see' things that are not visible to either the untrained eye of the researcher or her or his recording equipment.

In effect, starting with a division of cultural forms into visible and non-visible blurs distinctions between how the world looks, what researchers see and notice, and what members of a culture see, notice and find meaningful. Everything we know about empirical social research suggests that confounding these orientations is a bad idea.

Guided by the two key divisions noted above, the interface between visual studies and material culture can appear as a relatively narrow field of inquiry centered on 'pictures of artifacts.' This narrow view is relatively widespread, but it is challenged by investigations noted earlier of technologies and social life, the material circumstances in which cultural forms emerge, and the diversity of materials – only some of which can be characterized as artifacts – that are meaningful to people. It is also challenged by the increasingly diverse objects of inquiry being examined through visual observation, recording and elicitation strategies.

PROPOSITIONS

The research promise of the diverse studies noted in the preceding discussion and throughout this handbook is much greater than the promise of thinking only about 'pictures of artifacts.' Realizing that promise seems more likely if research were guided by a framework consistent with observed relationships between culture, materiality, visibility, inquiry and meaning. Many distinctions that adhere to the terms 'material and non-material culture' or 'visual and non-visual studies' are at odds with these observed relationships, but these relationships are relatively consistent with the following three propositions:

Proposition #1: All cultural practices depend on material support and instantiation.

The principle underlying this proposition is relatively straightforward: communication requires materiality, and culture and social life depend on communication. Without the kind of interpersonal materiality necessary to hear, touch, see, taste, and so on, human organisms lack the medium they need to create and participate in culture. This frames the material circumstances and resources by which individuals make sounds, touch, see, hear, taste, and so on, as significant objects of cultural inquiry and an important ground against which to figure how people live their individual and collective lives.

With this kind of materiality in mind, even ideas, attitudes or beliefs – or other cultural elements located in symbolic landscapes that subjects attach to ancestors, the cosmos, or to the Internet – depend for their existence and continuity on interactions between people and materials, interactions that take place in physical time and space. Games and kinship systems, language, religiosity, or law have all occurred to individuals or groups, caught our

gaze, or invited consideration because they were made materially manifest in conversations, books, computer screens, a physical embrace or harsh sound. Through interactions of this sort people learn about these 'non-material things,' pass them on to others, talk about them, create or remake them, or put them to rest. Though participants my overlook this fact, or even argue to the contrary, these interactions occur in specific, physical settings and require both time and material resources, without which they would not and could not take place.

Materiality, in this view, represents a somewhat mutable medium of constraints and opportunities within which culture, in quite varied forms, can be elaborated. All aspects of a culture are attached to this medium. The medium bears only an indirect and indeterminate relationship to specific cultural forms, but the attachments themselves reflect forms of materiality that have visual dimensions and can be examined as such.

> *Proposition #2: By definition, materials have physical properties that can be made visible, observed and recorded through the agency of human sight or other senses and a variety of optical–electrical–mechanical instruments.*

This proposition draws on physics – not on anthropology, sociology or cultural studies – but considered in consort with the first proposition, it has far-reaching implications for visual studies of culture and social life, the core of which appears in a third proposition.

> *Proposition #3: All cultural phenomena can be examined visually, either directly through the agency of human sight or through physical instruments and mediated representations that focus attention on attachments between cultural forms and the materiality on which they depend.*

Taken together, these three propositions reflect a broad prospect for the visual study of culture and social life in general and the materiality of culture and social life in particular. To clarify the dimensions of this prospect, let me comment on some forms of cultural materiality that warrant, but have not yet received, the full attention of visual study scholars.

EXCEPTIONS AND QUALIFICATIONS

Few scholars will quibble about the value of visual studies in application to the familiar materiality of specific cultural forms – for example, clothing, food, architecture, dance, and so on. But what about cultural forms for which supporting materiality may be less clear – or even categorically denied? In practical applications, are some forms of culture and social life exempt from the three propositions noted above? Or does culture in any form truly depend on material dimensions that, by definition, can lend themselves to fruitful visual study?

To my way of thinking, no exemptions are called for, but the presumed boundaries of some cultural practices may be drawn too narrowly. This applies in some cases to material attachments that are obvious but so taken-for-granted that they go unnoticed. Unaided oral conversation, for example, is considered frequently as a kind of ephemeral performance that leaves no material or visible evidence in its wake. However, conversation depends on the material presence of relatively quiet air, the lack of which – in very noisy or turbulent environments, the vacuum of outer space, underwater, or over great distances – makes conversation impossible without some alternative mediating technology (telephones, texting, and so on).

While the material presence of good air is a constraint for conversation, it also makes possible material records (audio recordings) that can be converted mechanically or through various forms of coding, to a variety of visible and visual analogs – written transcripts, acoustic waveforms, audio clip databases, statistical tables, and so on. If we consider that some face-to-face conversations may

also require enough light for people to see each other, we can add to situations that meet that requirement the prospect for other material evidence, including video recordings, that support even more complex forms of visual analysis. In both cases, the materiality upon which conversation depends also defines attachments between conversation and the material world that can be observed, recorded and tracked for purposes of social and cultural analysis – including analyses that have explicit or implicit visual dimensions.

A similar reconsideration applies for how we think about the activity of reading. This is frequently regarded as a private and internal matter that cannot be observed or materialized. However, reading depends on the movement and concentration of optical attention, adequate lighting and a materialized text. Take any of these away and reading, as we know it, is no longer possible (though something similar might be possible in another material form, such as books on tape). These requisite circumstances constrain the act of reading, but they also attach internal, private, cerebral processes of reading to material circumstances that can be recorded and examined. This may seem obvious for the 'materialized text' – though decades of reading scholarship have theorized about text comprehension without attending to the material form in which the text appeared to readers – but it's also true for the duration and direction of optical attention. Indeed, one of the more intriguing intersections between visual studies and material culture is the growth of instrumented 'eye-tracking' studies (see Chapter 23). These have become a resource for understanding not only how people move through words on a printed page but also for how they view and decode text and non-text features in a wide range of environments.

Beyond conversation and reading, similar prospects for material and visual analyses apply to a wide range of cultural forms that by definition or acclaim are considered to be 'non-material.' Thoughts, for example, and feelings, beliefs and attitudes are typically seen in just this way. However, a growing body of research suggests both the situation-specific dimensions of these supposedly internal states and processes and the salient materiality of the situations in which they occur– and, for that matter of their physiology, as revealed in magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) studies. Some of this research has focused on the particulars of how students learn or teachers teach (Dyson, 1989, 1993; Nespor, 1997; Wagner, 1999), while other studies have looked at the acquisition of knowledge and skills in non-school settings (Resnick, 1987; Lave, 1988). Cutting across perspectives of education, anthropology, sociology and cultural studies, the gist of these studies is that the same kind of material transactions that make culture and communication both possible and likely also make possible and likely – or unlikely – a broad array of culturally appropriate activities of mind, including perspectives (Becker et al., 1961, 1995), beliefs (Best, 1990; Clark, 1995), emotions (Hochschild, 2003) and attitudes.

Examining the materiality attached to these expressions can be extremely useful in understanding how individual persons interact with specific social and physical environments, but it's also a key to understanding larger social processes. Indeed, not only are conversations, reading, thinking and feelings attached to material media that have visual dimensionsbut also so are the collective phenomena of kinship, policymaking, morality, socializing, jurisprudence and science, liberal arts and vocational education – or as illustrated in Figure 4.5, thinking about school improvement. One need not argue that visual analyses of these phenomena can fully characterize or describe them to make the point that visible, material dimensions are among their essential constituents.

Of course, visual dimensions of cultural phenomena can be more or less salient than those accessed through other senses. And, as noted above, sensory perception is only one coefficient of social and cultural significance.

Figure 4.5 Materials brought together to help 22 fellow teachers think collectively about assessing and improving the mathematics achievement of their students. For both workshop leaders and participants, the thinking of participating teachers during this two-day retreat depended on ready access to these materials and relative isolation from the familiar environment of their classrooms and school. © 2003 Jon Wagner

But determining the material and visual significance of phenomena for different subject populations is an empirical project, not something researchers can arbitrarily decide on their own. When and to whom does seeing the person we are talking to matter a lot or a little? What kinds of things can and do people look at to help them think? Which of these things are most noticeable to people who are good at thinking in certain ways? What kinds of materials are most meaningful to people in understanding their history? What do those materials look like, and where are they most likely to be found, lost, created or destroyed? When people say they believe in something, what does that dispose them to see or not see?

PROSPECTS

The hypothetical questions posed above affirm an abiding connection between things and ideas and a broad agenda for visual studies and material culture. Attending to the propositions on which they rest could generate increased attention to several themes that have suffered relative neglect within the visual studies/material culture paradigm. Among these are the following themes.

Embodied cultural activity

Recognizing the role of human bodies in the production and distribution of culture could

freshen and deepen understanding of the interface between social and physical contexts of culture and social life (see Figure 4.6 for a cross-culturally complex instance of this interface). Hopefully, this could extend visual studies of embodiment from the classic work by Bateson and Mead (1942) into a wide range of contemporary contexts – Lifchez (1979), Harper (1987), Greenfield (2002) and Sudnow (2001) provide contrasting, but equally promising examples. Two useful questions to consider here, for any form of culture or social life, are: What is required of bodies for this cultural activity to thrive or die? And, how does that look to people whose bodies might be involved?

Commodified culture

The potential of multi-media recordings and artifact collections to commodify culture is poorly understood. At their worst, recordings and artifact collections can help transfer attribution and control of heritage materials from a culture of origin to outside entrepreneurs and investors (Kwak, 2005; Skrydstrup, 2006; Lilley, 2008). Policy frameworks that separate 'ideas' from their 'material form' make this unfortunate outcome more possible rather than less. These frameworks may be consistent with the narrow conception of material cultural noted above (and may have legal precedent within that), but they are also

Figure 4.6 Visiting Bhutanese archers mix indigenous and exotic materials to demonstrate the construction of traditional bows and arrows at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. The archers used bamboo shoots from a particular region of Bhutan for the arrow shafts, but they borrowted a Swiss Army knife from an audience member to trim the feathers. Clear distinctions between material and non-material culture are challenged by the embodied integration of materials, knowledge, aesthetic ideals and craft that characterize cultural activities of this sort. © 2003 Jon Wagner

at odds with a diverse array of cultural practices (Hirsch, 2002; Scafidi, 2005). Advancing theory about the intersection of ideas, things and imagery is key to sorting these matters out. An important orienting question for this line of inquiry is: What does it look like for different persons or groups to 'own' cultural forms that they care about?

Mediated communication

We know precious little about how mediated representations shape social interaction and common knowledge. Approaching this question from within a distinction between material and non-material culture seems cumbersome. In the same way that an understanding of food practices requires attention to the intersection of materials and ideas, so too does an understanding of multi-modal and mediated communication (Norris, 2004). In both cases, visual studies, questions and methods represent a relatively untapped resource for guiding empirical work towards more sophisticated and robust theory. Interesting questions abound in this area, many of them attuned to some version of: What is it that people are interacting with when they interact with each other through different media?

Visualizing culture and social life

New media technologies frame perplexing questions about where culture and social life are located, created and managed. However, they also bring researchers new tools for linking ideas and cultural things and for visualizing, teaching and communicating about culture and social life. Applied within 'virtual reality' (VR) environments, some new media tools can create enriched representations of indigenous culture. They can also be configured as interactive environments that suspend culturally familiar perceptions of researchers, lay audiences and students or that simulate for VR participants a variety of hands-on experiences with features of the material world.

This dual potential for representation and simulation positions virtualreality technologies as an increasingly important feature of the human life space and a powerful resource for visualizing, teaching and communicating about culture and social life. Some projects undertaken by my colleagues at the University of California, Davis to realize these potentials include: Milman Harrison's efforts to create a racially dynamic online environment in Second Life that his students can explore and examine as part of their undergraduate coursework; Peter Yellowlee's online simulations of schizophrenia as a teaching resource for medical students; and the Keck Caves interactive environment created at the W. M. Keck Center for Active Visualization in the Earth Sciences. We don't know much about how any of these materials and environments work in purely educational terms, but that's true as well for the traditional modes and materials of teaching and learning – for example, books, lectures, courses of study – to which new media forms provide alternatives. In both a literal and figurative sense, we need to know how good versions of this kind of teaching and learning 'look' – to those who design and deliver it and to those who benefit from participating as students and audience members.

Documenting cultural production

We have much to learn about how different kinds of cultural materials come into being, are distributed and used, celebrated or set aside. Visual studies of how and when material artifacts are fabricated represent a resource of continuing value in that regard, as do studies that examine the transposition and re-purposing of a wide range of materials (whether or not they appear as discrete artifacts). But important insights could also emerge from visual studies of social and cultural phenomena framed by the

seam between materiality and ideation-social networks, for example, or regulatory texts; access points between doctors and patients, parents and children, politicians and those who vote for them (or don't); and evolving conceptions of location and direction, information and knowledge, narrative and news. How do such things look, not just now, but as they come into view for different individuals and groups? And what do different 'views' of these elements of the modern world imply for the worlds people are disposed to accept, reject, buy, sell or fight for?

It seems unlikely that these phenomena, concerns and questions can get the attention and theorizing they deserve if scholars continue to think casually about material culture and visual studies. For better or worse, we live in a world in which bodies, materials and ideas matter in consort; in which digital bits and bytes lead back and forth to real goods, services, opportunities and scams; in which material and mediated cultural materials are alternately molded, melded, sanctified, trashed and sold. For these reasons and more, seeing the things people live with, for, around, in spite of and through, while far from a simple matter, is worth a close and continuing look.

NOTES

1 iTunes is a trademark of Apple Inc., registered in the USA and in other countries.

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