

Interpreting images and text

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Introduction

Conducting interviews is one key way in which social researchers can explore geographical phenomena. However, there are other ways in which we can understand the world. We can, for example, examine policy documents, web-pages, or campaign material. Perhaps we can even 'read' more unusual cultural 'texts' such as documentaries, films, images or even graffiti, in order to gain insight into the geographies around us.

As Cosgrove tells us:

"The kind of evidence that [we] now use for interpreting the symbolism of cultural landscapes is much broader than it has been in the past. Material evidence in the field and cartographic, oral, archival and other documentary sources all remain valuable. But often we find the evidence of cultural products themselves – paintings, poems, novels, folk tales, music, film and song - can provide as firm a handle on the meanings that places and landscapes possess, express and evoke as do more conventional 'factual' sources." (Cosgrove, 1989, p.127).

In this way, art, books, media, and museum archives can be used to interpret the worlds of exotic or mundane places. Even films and adverts can be employed to explore and understand the social world. As Aitkin points out, in recent years the prospect of studying the world "in armchair with popcorn" has become as popular as fieldwork study in the traditional sense (Aitkin, 1997, p.197).

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Many social researchers have begun to use the idea of 'texts' to help us understand how we should research the social world. When reading these new forms of cultural text, it is vital to take into account the context (both geographical and cultural) that existed when these texts were produced. The possibility of different readings or interpretations of cultural texts is often familiar to us, especially in relation to books or poems. It is, however, only through critically reflecting on the values of, for example, a swastika or a cross in different cultures in different places, that we can appropriately read these cultural texts. Think, for example, what the following image might mean in a range of different contexts:



This representation of a banana may signify a range of different meanings, depending on the geographical or cultural context. It may mean: slapstick comedy, vitamins, trade wars, or racism, for example. Some familiar signs may also be read in a range of ways. For example, what does this sign mean?



As Marcus Doel (2003) has argued: this sign may refer to 'No Smoking' in a specific time and place. It tells us we shouldn't smoke, and that this space is defined as a smoking-free space. However, it also tells us we shouldn't smoke cigarettes here; does this mean we could smoke pipes? Could we hold a cigarette and not smoke it? Does it matter if the cigarette is lit or not? Would you comply with the request made by this sign, or would you resist it? Why?

It is vital to be sensitive to the context in which these texts are used, and how they come to affect human behaviour. Through

these signs and symbols we come to understand what some people think is appropriate behaviour in certain contexts, and whether people conform to this behaviour or not. We can ask therefore, what does a text 'say' to us? What actions does it encourage and discourage? Who benefits from these signs, and who suffers? How might this sign be changed, and how could the social space it controls be inhabited differently?

Conclusions

The qualitative resources we can use to understand the world around us are much broader than conventional interviews or surveys. Street signs, double yellow lines, pedestrian crossings (etc.), can be read as cultural texts which order our everyday geographies. These signs construct appropriate behaviours in different settings, and can be read in numerous ways. A short film illustrating some examples can be found here: <http://www.spatialmanifesto.com/teaching-projects/culture-place-space>

We – as students and citizens - read these cultural texts every day. How do they affect our, and your behaviour? How do they mould and influence what places are like? How do they improve our lives, and in what ways? How do they influence where we go and what we do? It is possible for students to identify their own cultural texts, and discuss the different power relations and geographies these simple signs and symbols create in our everyday lives.



What does this sign mean?

References

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