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Review of Image Studies: Theory and Practice

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Book Review

Review by Robert E. Gutsche, Jr
Book Review Editor: Erik Palmer



Sunil Manghani

Image Studies: Theory and Practice

271 pages

London, UK/New York, NY: Routledge • 2013

Softcover \$49.95

When a man was pushed and fell onto subway tracks in New York City in 2012, just seconds in front of a rumbling subway train, a freelance photographer for the *New York Post* started shooting. His flashes, the photographer thought, would alert the train engineer to stop, and, as witnesses would say later, there was no way anyone could have saved the man, no way the train could have been stopped. Simply, he was doomed. Indeed, the *Post* ran that very word as its headline on the next day's cover: just the text, set in block text—DOOMED; the subway train approaches, its lights glowing yellow, the train's engineer peering through the windshield. Our victim, struck and killed, is captured in a photograph before it happens, clearly seeing the train approach, his arm and hand reaching for the platform above him, efforts of a failed escape. It became a photograph about both life and death.

Debate among journalists, readers, and scholars about the *Post's* decision to publish the photograph, however, raged for weeks: Did the photographer do enough (or anything) to save the man? What should the public see about pending death? What do they deserve to see—or to not see? This was not a new debate, but the

“DOOMED” photograph provided another opportunity for inquiry about visual culture in terms of economic motivations, the “decisive moment,” ethics of production, art, and the cultural function of images.

Often, however, discussions about images and situations similar to “DOOMED” focus on normative explanations and interests. At those times, it is refreshing to invite into the discussion a work that pushes explanations for how images are created, transformed, and interpreted from a critical and cultural perspective. Sunil Manghani's *Image Studies: Theory and Practice* would be helpful at such moments. His interests and interpretations help pose (and speculate about) questions such as: How and why do images hold cultural meaning? How can an image do that? Are images really doing anything? How do we find out?

A Reader in Critical and Cultural Theory at the Winchester School of Art in the UK's University of Southampton, author of *Image Critique & the Fall of the Berlin Wall* (2008), and coeditor of *Images: A Reader* (2006), Manghani writes to those who want to go beyond “reading” images in order to have a deeper discussion about what

images are (or might be), how they operate in culture, and how their power can be discerned. More than a mere synopsis of previous work on visual culture, *Image Studies* constructs a larger conceptual discussion about advancing the exploration of signs as not just representations but as objects in and of themselves with particular purposes, intentions, and complexities. Manghani loosely defines this approach as “image studies,” which “can be understood to evoke a structural, comparative account of, and critical enquiry into, a heterogeneous set of contexts and systems of signification apropos the image and image-making” (p. 8).

While Manghani does not discuss “DOOMED,” his approach to addressing images not just to read their signs and embedded ideologies but to move us away from exploring the whys and hows as a means to examine how we interact with visuals and what we “do” with them introduces into the field a book that can be easily taught across curricula and grade levels. Pushing away from using traditional semiotics to read a visual to placing those images in what scholarship tends to refer to as “vernacular landscapes,” *Images Studies* starts at a level of analysis afforded those more familiar with visual scholarship but nicely reins in the discussion to be an approachable challenge for those seeking an introduction. To ease the reader through his analysis of image studies, Manghani provides 14 “tasks” throughout the book that provide engaging questions about, and applications of, image production, critique, and cultural inquiry. Not as much a workbook as a manner of expanding upon sketches one might make in the book’s margins or between its lines, these exercises serve as prompts for conversation.

For students (both undergraduate and graduate), these tasks could serve as assignments to apply artistic prowess and to conceptualize their own creations or artifacts found in the everyday. In a chapter among several that apply cultural theory to new forms of media, including scientific imaging, readers are charged with selecting an infographic from the media and dissecting it to reveal how images are produced and constructed, maintained and disseminated. Manghani asks readers to research the graphic’s primary data and to “measure” the degree to which designers accurately and adequately represent the data through size, proportions, and colors. In this exercise, readers experience the depth of meaning embedded in images by dissecting data (and, perhaps, the validity of the data itself) and, guided by Manghani’s conceptualization of visual culture, are exposed to the living power of images.

Readers might also be intrigued by the book’s discussions on comics, digital images, image manipulation, adaptation, and appropriation, which are all rooted in the seminal cultural works of Barthes, Benjamin, Derrida, and Sontag. In the end, Manghani meets his aim of applying—and furthering—cultural studies approaches to images. Touching upon critical theories associated with art that resist and question dominant interpretations and modes of production, *Image Studies* bridges introductory lessons on visual culture with an advanced assessment with which readers can approach decisions and meanings associated with images that appear in our everyday experiences—of both triumph and of tragedy.

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