2. ANALYZING THE CONTENT OF VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS

The visual material of interest to us in this book, primarily photographs, but to a lesser extent drawings and paintings, constitute part of a larger class of data known as documentary sources. These data include various forms of written reports and documents, audio recordings of speech and music, and visual records in the form of photographs, films, sketches, and the like, which can be put to a wide range of uses in social scientific research (see e.g., Mann, 1985, pp. 66-95; Platt, 1981; Scott, 1990). The major systematic and empirical method that has been developed for analyzing documentary data is content analysis. The modern version of the method emerged in the early twentieth century and was codified into its canonical form by Berelson (1952) in his *Content Analysis in Communication Research*.

For Berelson, content analysis is “a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (p. 18). Studies employing content analysis have overwhelmingly concentrated on written rather than audio or visual records, using, for example, organizational files (Wheeler, 1969), newspapers (Williams, 1976), periodical and ephemeral literature, and the like. Communication is considered to consist of a flow of messages from a transmitter to a receiver; thus, from an author to a readership, from a television program to its audience, or from a photograph to its viewer. It is the “manifest”—that is, the obvious, palpable, self-evident—features of the message that are of relevance to content analysis, not its latent or hidden dimensions. Thus content analysis is primarily limited to what is expressly communicated by some document rather than the motives animating the construction of the document or the responses that persons make to it (Berelson, 1952, p. 16; see also Holsti, 1969, pp. 12-14).

The method claims to offer an “objective,” “systematic,” and “quantitative” (Berelson, 1952, pp. 16-17) analysis of documentary content. The objectivity of content analysis resides in the devising of precisely and clearly defined categories to apply to the material analyzed in accordance with explicitly formulated rules of procedure. In principle, different analysts using the same categories and rules would obtain identical results from their analysis of any given body of data; therein lies the reliability of the method. The rules of procedure serve to minimize the influence of the individual analyst’s disposition and preconceptions. The requirement that content analysis is systematic means that all the material relevant to the investigation must be analyzed, not just a selection designed to support a preferred hypothesis. Content analysis is also primarily a quantitative technique in that it aims to establish the frequency with which certain categories or themes appear in the material investigated. This quantitative dimension is facilitated by assigning numerical values to category or theme frequencies and is a basic characteristic of the method; there is also a variant of content analysis with a qualitative orientation, which we consider later.

Content Analysis of Visual Representation:
Two Studies of Fashion

How can the principles of content analysis be applied to visual materials? In this section, we have selected two studies of fashion to illustrate the application of content analysis to visual materials: Richardson and Kroeker’s (1940) paper on changes in women’s dress and Robinson’s (1976) paper on shifts in the shaving and trimming of men’s beards. Use of the method involves six basic steps: (1) selecting a topic and determining a research
problem; (2) selecting a documentary source; (3) devising a set of analytic categories; (4) formulating an explicit set of instructions for using the categories to code the material; (5) establishing a principled basis for sampling the documents; and (6) counting the frequency of a given category or theme in the documents sampled.

1. SELECTING A TOPIC AND DETERMINING A RESEARCH PROBLEM

The first step in any scientific inquiry is the selection of a topic for investigation and the determination of a "research problem." Both studies consider aspects of the role of fashion in social life, a topic that has long interested sociologists (e.g., Simmel, 1957; Sapi, 1931; König, 1973). Richardson and Kroeber examined women's evening or formal dress in Western Europe and the United States, and Robinson investigated men's facial hair. They attempted to provide precise knowledge of the fluctuations in adornment that lie at the heart of fashion:

This study is an attempt to define stylistic changes in an objective and quantitative manner. (Richardson & Kroeber, 1940, p. 11)

This report represents the result of a careful sampling of the comparative frequencies over time of men's choices of forms of grooming of their facial hair. (Robinson, 1976, p. 1133)

The research problem for both studies was essentially descriptive: Are there patterns in the fashioning of women's dress and men's facial hair that can be discerned and measured? Content analysis purports to offer a method for providing a quantitative and objective description of these patterns.

2. SELECTING A DOCUMENTARY SOURCE

The next step in content analysis involves the identification of a documentary source (or sources) as an appropriate research site (i.e., relevant to the research problem). Here we consider fashion, a highly visual social phenomenon in which an element of display is always prominent.

Richardson and Kroeber used a variety of sources of data. Although the study covers the 332 years from 1605 to 1936, the soundest part of their empirical work is for the period 1787-1936, based on dated fashion plates in first lithographic and then photographic form. For the period prior to 1787, some rather less satisfactory data sources, engravings and portrait paintings, were drawn upon. Plainly, there are technological and historical restrictions on the data that are available and that can be selected for analysis. Robinson's study is explicitly modeled after Richardson and Kroeber, but differs from their work in relying on a single data source, the Illustrated London News. This magazine, published continuously throughout the sample period 1842-1972, presented the investigator with a rich source of pictures of men's faces.

3. DEVISING A SET OF CATEGORIES

The categories into which the content is to be coded are plainly central parts of the analytical process. As Berelson (1952) observed, "Content analysis stands or falls by its categories . . . since the categories contain the substance of the investigation, a content analysis can be no better than its system of categories" (p. 147). There are certain general criteria to be satisfied by all categories for a sound content analysis to be produced (cf. Holsti, 1969, pp. 95-100). First of all, the categories must reflect and be sensitive to the research problem. Richardson and Kroeber's research problem, the quantitative description of changes in women's dress fashions, is expressed in six measures: (1) length of dress, (2) length of waist, (3) depth of décolletage, (4) width of skirt, (5) width of waist, and (6) width of décolletage. Robinson's investigation of frequencies of types of facial hair grooming uses a schedule of five categories: (1) sideburns alone, (2) sideburns and mustache in combination, (3) beard, (4) mustache alone, and (5) clean-shaven. In each case, the categories chosen appropriately reflect the research problem.

Further requirements are that categories are mutually exclusive and exhaustive of the content under consideration. It is important that any element of the content is coded under one and only one category and that the category system is sufficiently comprehensive to provide space for every relevant aspect of content. Both studies meet these requirements.

4. FORMULATING AN EXPLICIT SET OF CODING RULES

Any given instance of content has to be coded, that is, allocated to one (and only one) category. Sometimes, however, a given item of content may be ambiguous and fall between two or more categories, and for that reason, it is essential that categories are sufficiently explicit to provide coders with clear instructions about how to deal with the problematic item. Sometimes decision rules have to be formulated to handle such ambiguities. Thus in
Richardson and Kroeber (1940), we find that “length of waist” is measured by the “Distance from the mouth to the minimum diameter across the waist. The girdle, or the lower edge of the corsage part of the dress, may coincide with this or lie above or below this diameter” (p. 112). More prosaically, Robinson (1976) deemed it necessary to define a beard as “any amount of whiskers centering on the chin” (p. 1134).

5. SAMPLING THE DOCUMENTS

Some selection of the material to be analyzed is usually necessary in order to ensure that a properly representative sample is obtained. Richardson and Kroeber (1940) attempted to acquire at least 10 pictures for each year; they admit encountering difficulty in reaching this number for the years prior to 1844, however (p. 133). Robinson aimed for a much larger annual total—100—and indeed in one year managed to obtain a total of 1,730 observations. Both studies excluded certain data from analysis: Richardson and Kroeber used only full-face or almost full-face figures because figures in profile could not provide all the required measurements (p. 112). Robinson excluded group photographs, advertisements, royalty, and non-Europeans, as each of these categories presented sources of bias to his sample of mainly British gentlemen “prominent in one way or another in their nation’s affairs” (1976, p. 1134). The dating of Robinson’s material was unproblematic because it all derived from a periodical publication. This was not true of Richardson and Kroeber’s material, and they made knowledge of the date of each picture they analyzed “an absolute requirement” (1940, p. 112). In these ways, the researchers attempted to guard against the entry of atypical data into their research design.

6. COUNTING THE FREQUENCIES OF THE CATEGORIES

A count must be made of how often the categories appear in the content under investigation. The information thus obtained can be readily presented in tables or graphs, the practice adopted in the studies we reviewed: Richardson and Kroeber, for example, present 11 graphs and 29 tables to document shifts in the dimensions of women’s dress. It is noteworthy that tables and graphs are the only visual data to figure in both research reports. The provision of examples of the data is deemed superfluous to the aims of content analysis; what is relevant is the tabular and graphical representation of the findings of the research. Moreover, much of the material collected in large-scale content analysis readily lends itself to cross-tabulation and significance testing, and here the researcher has been powerfully aided by the computer (see Gerbner, Holsti, Krippendorff, Paisley, & Stone, 1969; Krippendorff, 1980).

The principal finding of both studies reviewed here was to discover evidence for wavelike fluctuations in Western female dress and European male tonsorial styles. Richardson and Kroeber (1940) concluded that there is an alternating cycle of approximately 50 years duration between the minima and maxima of the basic dimensions of women’s dress. Thus, the periodicity of the wave is about 100 years (p. 148). In addition, they found evidence to distinguish between periods of high and low variability of style. Robinson’s study also furnished evidence of a century-long fashion wave-length, in this case computed from the average of the sideburns and mustaches, beards, and mustaches. Robinson reported a remarkable correspondence between the Richardson-Kroeber skirt-width wave and his own beard wave (see Figure 2.1).

How can these wavelike patterns best be explained? Richardson and Kroeber did not address this question in an extended way, preferring to stay close to descriptive concerns. The causes of the century-long wave periodicity of fashions are not given, and the authors caution us that data gathered for other civilizations may reveal very different patterns. The authors are confident, however, that they have detected evidence of a supra-individual, cultural patterning of changes in fashion, a patterning that cannot be accounted for by stock social psychological explanations of imitation, emulation, and competition. Robinson (1976) goes a step further and tries to explain why the wave has a duration of a century (pp. 1138–1139). Fashions of the preceding generations are often considered ugly or distasteful by the current generation. As long as there are numbers of people who follow a superseded fashion, that fashion will be looked on askance by the current generation. The distasteful associations of the superseded fashion will take approximately a century to disappear, or roughly a lifetime plus a generation.

An Appraisal of the Utility of Content Analysis

For studies such as those reviewed above, content analysis has several virtues. First of all, it is a standardized technique that permits the processing of large amounts of data covering long time spans. Moreover, it is an unobtrusive research method, avoiding the problems of researcher effects
on the data that are inherent in reactive research methods such as interviewing. It suffers from certain shortcomings, however, the most serious of which involve the issues of manifest and latent content, data fragmentation, and quantification. For ethnographically inclined researchers, these issues set limits on the usefulness of the method for the analysis of visual representations.

**MANIFEST AND LATENT CONTENT**

Berelson (1952) sought to restrict content analysis to what is manifestly apparent in the communicative message, excluding implicit or latent meanings from the coding operation. Our two studies stayed close to this constraint, but accompanying losses should not be ignored.

To meet the constraint, a clearly defined category system must plainly state the characteristics of content that are to qualify as instances of a given category (cf. Robinson’s definition of a beard, above). As we have seen, every effort is made to treat coding as a mechanical procedure in which content is matched to category so that the coder need only inspect the manifest content of the data (e.g., a photograph) for the relevant features specified by the category system (clean-shaveness, beard, etc.). It is important that the coder make no attempt to interpret the data in any wider way, such as by trying to recover the communicator’s intent in publishing this picture showing a man thusly composed, because that would result in the coder speculating about latent meanings. But for some analysts of communication (e.g., Glassner & Corzine, 1982), the insistence upon coding only manifest content is too restrictive. These analysts argued that excessive emphasis on standardized technique can result in reliability being bought at the expense of validity. The significance of the communicative message may lie less in its manifest content than in the context in which it occurs.

**DATA FRAGMENTATION**

The characteristics articulated by the category system may or may not correspond to the categories that members of the society employ to understand the communicative message. Moreover, categorization isolates those elements of the communicative message determined by the analyst’s theoretical relevancies (e.g., “length of waist,” “width of waist”), whereas members of a society interpret a picture as a complete gestalt, representing, for example, “a fashionable young woman.” Content analysis, by virtue of the methodological constraint of focusing upon manifest content, tends to break up instances of the communicative message into their elements, and it is solely the presence, absence, or frequency of these elements that is deemed relevant to the investigation. Content analysis is thus a research technique that in serving the theoretical purposes of the analyst (e.g., attempting to uncover historical patterns in fashion), isolates and atomizes its data, fragmenting the content of communication and effectively decontextualizing the message—a process that phenomenologists refer to as losing the phenomenon, or failing to respect the originary right of all data (cf. Waksler, 1986).

It follows that content analysis cannot properly appreciate the symbolic character of communication as it is naturally experienced, despite claims to the contrary by some content analysts (e.g., Krippendorff [1980], who maintains—without adequate demonstration—that it is quite possible for content analysis to be conducted in a manner “homorphic to the symbolic process in reality” [p. 31]). Moreover, communication content is only ever dealt with in the elemental units of the category system, not as a totality or natural whole. Content analysis behavioralizes its data in the interest of
testing a scientifically formulated hypothesis. Readers of the *Illustrated London News* do not see a photograph as portraying a man with a mustache, however, but rather, for example, a portrait of Mr. X, an up-and-coming politician. An appreciation of communication content in its totality is one hallmark of symbolism and structuralism, the analytical schemes considered in the next chapter; a sensitivity to the social context in which the communicative message occurs is a feature of ethnomethodological work examined in the chapter that follows. These approaches show that it is possible to go beyond the manifest aspects of communication content, and to do so in a disciplined and systematic way.

**QUANTIFICATION AND QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS**

Berelson (1952) argued that content analysis is an *essentially* quantitative research technique, and the two studies we have reviewed are representative in this respect. Content of communication is construed in quantitative terms, and what is taken as significant in the coded content is what occurs most frequently. For critics of various theoretical persuasions (e.g., Cicourel, 1964; Burgelin, 1972; Sumner, 1979), a major problem with content analysis is that repetition becomes the mark of significance. What is important, what is noteworthy in communication content is, for example, that 47% of the men who appeared in the *London Illustrated News* in the 5 years centering on 1892 wore beards. But repetition or frequency is a poor guide to the communicative significance or meaning of a particular item. What does wearing a beard indicate about a man around 1892 in England? Does it suggest respectability or wisdom or roughishness? A content analysis cannot address this kind of question.

Moreover, there are circumstances where frequency of a measure of significance can be positively misleading. In a popular film, to take an example from Burgelin (1972), a gangster may commit dozens of evil deeds, all of which may be "redeemed" in the audience’s eyes by a single, splendidly heroic act in the final scene (p. 319). A count of antisocial and prosocial acts would not begin to get close to the meaning of the gangster’s conduct in the film. Rather than viewing significance in frequency terms, structuralism argues "that the meaning of what is frequent is only revealed by opposition to what is rare" (Burgelin, 1972, p. 319), and thus a proper appreciation of communication needs to analyze these oppositions.

An advocate of a strictly quantitative version of content analysis, such as Berelson, is suspicious of any attempt to introduce qualitative considerations into the technique: to do so is to risk its objectivity and systematicness. In fact, Berelson holds that qualitative content analysis is better described as "content assessment," because a subjective and arbitrary valuational component is introduced into the method that results in an unscientific approach differing little from traditional literary textual analysis.

It must be admitted that it is unclear whether qualitative content analysis actually constitutes a distinct technique. It is perhaps more accurately considered a residual category encompassing procedures of coding or interpreting communication content that are at variance with Berelson’s strict conception. Kracauer’s (1952) definition of qualitative content analysis suggested that it consists of "the selection and rational organization of such categories as condense the substantive meanings of the given text, with a view to testing pertinent assumptions and hypotheses. These categories may or may not invite frequency counts" (p. 638). Kracauer argued that dependence upon preestablished categories applied to manifest elements of the content of communication can easily result in the inadequate treatment of the significance of key words or phrases; qualitative analysis, in contrast, is appropriately placed to pick up such nuances. Note how far Kracauer’s recommendations depart from Berelson’s: There is no requirement to treat only manifest content, but equally there are no clear, replicable procedures presented whereby the substantive meanings of a given text can be condensed. Nor are frequency counts barred from qualitative content analysis, but this point simply sidesteps the problem: Under what circumstances is a count to be preferred over a qualitative appraisal of communication content?

These difficulties give some point to Berelson’s complaint about the dangers of content assessment once the strict criterion of quantification is abandoned, and it cannot be claimed that Kracauer’s conception provides a completely alternative set of principles to guide the investigator. It would be a mistake to dwell upon the quantitative-qualitative debate as here reviewed, however. Many modern content analysts (e.g., Holsti, 1969) simply insist on the requirements of objectivity and systematicness and prefer to treat the issue of manifest or latent content case by case, at the same time insisting on the need to observe replicable scientific procedures. Included in the latter may be some form of measurement, although not necessarily frequency counts: The presence or absence of a theme might be measured, but not the frequency with which it occurs in the data. Second, the arguments for a qualitative content analysis are best read not as recommendations for a single alternative technique, but as pointing in the direction of a range of methods.
for analyzing communication content, including those methods that this book addresses in subsequent chapters.

Conclusion

We have reviewed the use of content analysis as a technique to analyze certain social dimensions of fashion. The researchers reported no difficulty in applying the technique to visual data, even though it is most commonly employed to analyze linguistic data. We have also reviewed some of the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of the technique, both of which stem from its quantitative aspect. We conclude the chapter with some remarks on the quantitative-qualitative distinction.

We do not wish to overdraw the distinction between these two very general categories of social scientific research, which are probably better regarded as poles on a continuum rather than in Manichean either/or terms. Quantitative research aims to provide precise, empirically well corroborated statements about the relationship between two or more variables. The values of the variable (e.g., relative deprivation) are represented in numerical form so that measurement can proceed in a quantitative manner and various types of statistical testing can be employed. Qualitative research is not so much interested in the measurement of social variables as it is concerned to investigate the qualities that social phenomena have for the members of a society: the meanings or significance they attribute to beliefs, practices, appearances, types of person, and so forth. Content analysis, as a primarily quantitative method, is not well equipped to give access to those understandings, although as we have shown, it is a helpful way of discovering social patterns that operate, as it were, "behind the backs" of society's members and beyond the scope of (some of) their understandings.

The quantitative-qualitative distinction is the methodological dimension of the long-running dispute between proponents of positivism and interpretivism in the social sciences. Although much of what follows will be concerned with interpretivism's contribution to the analysis of visual data, we wish to conclude the chapter, if not on a conciliatory note, at least by cautioning the reader against too easy an acceptance of the convenient dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative research. Qualitative research, let it be noted, does not eschew measurement altogether. Certain actions may be described as occurring "often" or "rarely"; here measurement judgments are made, even though they are not statistically expressed. Quantitative research, for its part, does not rest on solid mathematical bedrock (Cicourel, 1964); there is an irreducible interpretive element in assigning numbers to variables and their indicators. Quantitative and qualitative research are not the opposed extremes they may appear on first sight.

3. SYMBOLIST AND STRUCTURALIST ANALYSES OF VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS

The previous chapter demonstrated the degree to which content analysis is unable to inform us about the qualitative, meaningful dimensions of culture. In the present chapter, we consider two related approaches, symbolic and structuralist analysis, that attempt to address the meaningful aspects of visual representations. We continue the substantive focus of the previous chapter on fashion and the appearance of the human body with a consideration of the Stratherns' (1971) symbolist analysis of self-decoration in Mount Hagen, New Guinea, and Lévi-Strauss's (1983) structuralist analysis of Northwest Coast American Indian masks. We conclude with a structuralist analysis of contemporary Western advertising (Williamson, 1978). Throughout, our concern is to outline the general principles of symbolic and structuralist analysis with reference to studies of visual representations.

The Symbolic Meanings of Visual Representations

Let us begin with an elementary point. Visual representations of men's beards, women's dresses, or whatever, reveal what is socially significant to a society's members. Gender, age-grade, class, and race, the so-called master statuses, are often rapidly and effortlessly communicated at a mere glance. And yet the ordinary sense made of appearances is an issue content analysis cannot address, because it fragments naturally occurring meanings, subsuming them under the analyst's categories. In contrast, for investigators working within symbolist and structuralist perspectives, the meanings of these appearances are the keys to a fuller understanding of the culture in which they are embedded. Instead of measuring isolated elements, symbolists and structuralists endeavor to arrive at a fuller appreciation of the visual representation by relating it to other social and cultural arrangements. Thus although symbolists and structuralists agree that the interpretation and use of symbols is a process that is universal to human social life, they differ in the analytic apparatus they employ to investigate that process.