Choosing a research methodology means developing a research question and the tools to generate evidence for its answer; both of these should be consistent with a theoretical framework. There are, of course, a very large number of philosophical, theoretical and conceptual discussions of visuality and images. This chapter gives a brief survey of some of the key arguments and debates in the past thirty years or so, to help you develop a theoretical framework for your own work. It also introduces the framework that this book will use to assess the usefulness of various methods; this is called a ‘critical visual methodology’. The chapter is divided into four sections:

1 the first section discusses a range of literature that explores the importance of the visual to contemporary Western societies;
2 the second offers a broad analytical framework for understanding how images have social effects;
3 the third suggests some more specific criteria for a critical approach to visual materials;
4 the fourth summarises the chapter’s key points.

1.1 An Introductory Survey of ‘The Visual’

Beginning in the 1970s, the social sciences experienced a significant change in their understanding of social life. While this change depended on a number of longer traditions of social and cultural analysis – especially the Marxist critique of mass culture offered by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and the development of ‘cultural studies’ by a group of scholars at Birmingham University in England – during the 1980s in particular it gathered force, pace and breadth. The change is often described as the ‘cultural turn’. That is, ‘culture’ became a crucial means by which many social scientists understood social processes, social
identities, and social change and conflict. Culture is a complex concept, but, in very broad terms, the result of its deployment has been that many social scientists are now very often interested in the ways in which social life is constructed through the ideas that people have about it, and the practices that flow from those ideas. To quote one of the major contributors to this shift, Stuart Hall:

Culture, it is argued, is not so much a set of things – novels and paintings or TV programmes or comics – as a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings – the ‘giving and taking of meaning’ – between the members of a society or group … Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is around them, and ‘making sense’ of the world, in broadly similar ways. (Hall 1997a: 2)

Those meanings may be explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious, they may be felt as truth or as fantasy, science or commonsense; and they may be conveyed through everyday speech, elaborate rhetoric, high art, TV soap operas, dreams, movies or muzak; and different groups in a society will make sense of the world in different ways. Whatever form they take, these made meanings, or representations, structure the way people behave – the way you and I behave – in our everyday lives.

This sort of argument can take very diverse forms. But many writers addressing these issues argued that the visual is central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western societies. We are, of course, almost constantly surrounded by different sorts of visual technologies – photography, film, video, digital graphics, television, acrylics, for example – and the images they show us – TV programmes, advertisements, snapshots, Facebook pages, public sculpture, movies, closed circuit television footage, newspaper pictures, paintings. All these different sorts of technologies and images offer views of the world; they render the world in visual terms. But this rendering, even by photographs, is never innocent. These images are never transparent windows onto the world. They interpret the world; they display it in very particular ways; they represent it. Thus a distinction is sometimes made between vision and visuality. Vision is what the human eye is physiologically capable of seeing (although it must be noted that ideas about that capability have changed historically and will most likely continue to change: see Crary 1992). Visuality, on the other hand, refers to how vision is constructed in various ways: ‘how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein’ (Foster 1988: ix). Another phrase with very similar connotations to visuality is scopic regime (Metz 1975). Both terms refer to the ways in which both what is seen and how it is seen are culturally constructed.

For some writers, the visual is the most fundamental of all senses. Gordon Fyfe and John Law (1988: 2), for example, claim that ‘depiction,
picturing and seeing are ubiquitous features of the process by which most human beings come to know the world as it really is for them’, and John Berger (1972: 7) suggests that this is because ‘seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak’. (Clearly these writers pay little attention to those who are born blind.) Other writers, however, prefer to historicise the importance of the visual, tracing what they see as the increasing saturation of Western societies by visual images. Many claim that this process has reached unprecedented levels, so that Westerners now interact with the world mainly through how we see it. Martin Jay (1993) has used the term ocularcentrism to describe the apparent centrality of the visual to contemporary Western life.

This narrative of the increasing importance of the visual to contemporary Western societies is part of a wider analysis of the shift from premodernity to modernity, and from modernity to postmodernity (for example, see Mirzoeff 1999: 1–33; Sturken and Cartwright 2009). It is often suggested – or assumed – that in premodern societies, visual images were not especially important, partly because there were so few of them in circulation. This began to change with the onset of modernity. In particular, it is suggested that modern forms of understanding the world depend on a scopic regime that equates seeing with knowledge. Chris Jenks (1995), for example, makes this case in an essay entitled ‘The Centrality of the Eye in Western Culture’, arguing that ‘looking, seeing and knowing have become perilously intertwined’ so that ‘the modern world is very much a “seen” phenomenon’ (Jenks 1995: 1, 2).

We daily experience and perpetuate the conflation of the ‘seen’ with the ‘known’ in conversation through the commonplace linguistic appendage of ‘do you see?’ or ‘see what I mean?’ to utterances that seem to require confirmation, or, when seeking opinion, by inquiring after people’s ‘views’. (Jenks 1995: 3)

Barbara Maria Stafford (1991), an historian of images used in the sciences, has argued that, in a process beginning in the eighteenth century, the construction of scientific knowledges about the world has become more and more based on images rather than on written texts; Jenks (1995) suggests that it is the valorisation of science in Western cultures that has allowed everyday understandings to make the same connection between seeing and knowing. However, that connection was also made in other fields of modern practice. Richard Rorty (1980), for example, traces the development of this conflation of seeing with knowing to the intersection of several ideas central to eighteenth century philosophy. Judith Adler (1989) examines tourism and argues that between 1600 and 1800 the travel of European elites was defined increasingly as a visual practice, based first on ‘an overarching scientific ideology that cast even the most humble tourists as part of ... the impartial survey of all creation’
(Adler 1989: 24), and later on a particular appreciation of spectacular visual and artistic beauty. John Urry (1990) has sketched the outline of a rather different ‘tourist gaze’, which he argues is typical of the mass tourism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see also Pratt 1992). Other writers have made other arguments for the importance of the visual to modern societies. The work of Michel Foucault explores the way in which many nineteenth century institutions depended on various forms of surveillance (1977) (Chapters 8 and 9 here examine the methodological implications of his work); and in his study of nineteenth century world fairs and exhibitions, Timothy Mitchell (1988) shows how European societies represented the whole world as an exhibition. Deborah Poole (1997) has traced how this modern vision was thoroughly racialised in the same period. In the twentieth century, Guy Debord (1983) claimed that the world has turned into a ‘society of the spectacle’, and Paul Virilio (1994) argues that new visualising technologies have created ‘the vision machine’ in which we are all caught. The use of the term visual culture refers to this plethora of ways in which the visual is part of social life.

While it is important to note the argument made by W.J.T. Mitchell (1986, 1994) that images and language are intextricably entangled, it nonetheless has been argued that modernity is ocularcentric. It is argued too that the visual is equally central to postmodernity; Nicholas Mirzoeff (1998: 4), for example, has proclaimed that ‘the postmodern is a visual culture’. However, in postmodernity, it is suggested, the modern relation between seeing and true knowing has been broken. Thus Mirzoeff (1998) suggests that postmodernity is ocularcentric not simply because visual images are more and more common, nor because knowledges about the world are increasingly articulated visually, but because we interact more and more with totally constructed visual experiences. Thus the modern connection between seeing and knowledge is stretched to breaking point in postmodernity:

Seeing is a great deal more than believing these days. You can buy an image of your house taken from an orbiting satellite or have your internal organs magnetically imaged. If that special moment didn’t come out quite right in your photography, you can digitally manipulate it on your computer. At New York’s Empire State Building, the queues are longer for the virtual reality New York Ride than for the lifts to the observation platforms. Alternatively, you could save yourself the trouble by catching the entire New York skyline, rendered in attractive pastel colours, at the New York, New York resort in Las Vegas. This virtual city will shortly be joined by Paris Las Vegas, imitating the already carefully manipulated image of the city of light. (Mirzoeff 1998: 1)

This is what Jean Baudrillard (1988) some time ago dubbed the simulacrum. Baudrillard argued that in postmodernity it is no longer possible to make a distinction between the real and the unreal; images had become...
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detached from any certain relation to a real world with the result that we now live in a scopic regime dominated by simulations, or simulacra.

The development of digital new media has a special place in these discussions (Gane and Beer 2008). While computing has a long history – the ‘Analytical Engine’ which Charles Babbage began designing in 1833 has some claim to be the first computer – many commentators argue that the emergence of a wide range of digital storage and communication devices over the past twenty years has significantly changed visual culture. They argue not only that these inventions account in large part for the pervasiveness of visual images in Western societies now, but also that the nature of digital images is changing contemporary visualities. This claim is built on the difference between analogue images and digital images, and in particular on the difference between the technologies underlying the production of an image (see Figure 1.1). Analogue images are created through technologies that have a one-to-one correspondence to what they are recording. Photography is an obvious example: an analogue photograph is created by light falling onto chemicals which react to that light to produce a visual pattern. Whether we are looking at an image of a leaf made by leaving that leaf on a sheet of light-sensitive paper in the sunshine, or at a famous photograph, like the one in Figure 2.2, taken with a relatively complex single lens reflex camera, they are both analogue photographs because both have a direct, physical relationship to a continuous pattern of light generated by objects.

Digital images, on the other hand, have no one-to-one correspondence with what they show. This is so for at least two reasons. First, the images produced with a digital camera are made by sampling patterns of light, because in a digital camera light falls on discrete light-sensitive cells. There is thus ‘a minute gap between samples which the digital recording can never fill’ (Cubitt 2006). Secondly, that pattern of light is converted into binary digital code by the digital camera’s software, and that binary code is then itself converted into different kinds of output. Most cameras use a combination of hardware and software to convert the code back into an image to be viewed on a camera or computer or phone screen, of course, but this is a programmed process rather than an inevitable consequence of using the light-sensitive technology embedded in a digital camera. In fact, since the pattern of light generated by what is being pictured has become computer code, that code can be used to produce all sorts of different things. As Sean Cubitt (2006: 250) notes, ‘from the standpoint of the computer, any input will always appear as mathematical, and any data can be output in any format. Effectively, an audio input can be output as a video image, as text, as a 3D model, as an instruction set for a manufacturing process, or another digital format that can be attached to the computer’. It is this manipulability of the digital code that for many scholars is the defining quality of digital images. For some, the difference between analogue and digital images is profound; David Rodowick (2007), for example, has argued that digital images should
These three images are very different representations of the difference between analogue and digital technologies. They were all found on the Internet in 2010.
not be called photographs. For him, the chemical process that creates analogue photographs gives them a unique quality which digital images do not and cannot have, such that ‘one feels or intuits in digital images that the qualitative expression of duration found in photography and film is missing or sharply reduced’ (2007: 118). In this sense, he argues that analogue photography is a specific medium, with particular visual qualities immanent in its analogue technology.

The concept of representation is still put to use by many scholars of digital media. For others, however, the emergence of these new technologies has encouraged a rather different theoretical approach to that underpinning the cultural turn, such that, for Nicholas Gane and David Beer (2008: 119), debates about simulation have overtaken those about simulacra. Beginning in the early twenty-first century, and inspired both by the work of philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and of information theorists such as Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, as well as by the growth in digital media (visual and otherwise), some scholars began to argue for a different understanding, not just of particular sorts of images like digital photographs, but of contemporary visual culture itself. For Katherine Hayles (1999), the proliferation of digital technologies invites a different way of thinking about how we are human, no less; indeed, she argues we are becoming ‘post-human’ because of the increasingly intense flows of information occurring now between humans, animals and machines. She sees these flows as ‘a co-evolving and densely interconnected complex system’ (Hayles 2006: 165; Thrift 2008), the scale and intensity of which has been immeasurably enhanced by development of high-speed computers and the Internet. Rodowick (2001) argues that these flows – in the extent and intensity of their dispersal, and in their ability to constantly reform coded information from one output to another – demand a specifically Deleuzian response, and it is this response that challenges the usefulness of the concept of representation. This is because Deleuze’s ‘creative ontology of becoming ceaselessly strives to go beyond mere surface fixities associated with the “actual” (for example the existing conditions of current culture and society) in the effort to assemble a conceptual discourse capable of conveying pre-individual impersonal forces, energies, fluxes, flows and sensations that actual socio-historical situations occlude, reify and domesticate into rational orders, conceptual systems and cliched patterns of representation and intelligibility’ (Ambrose 2007: 118). These ‘pre-individual impersonal forces, energies, fluxes, flows and sensations’ are termed affect in Deleuzian work, and this approach has had a significant impact on how some scholars theorise visual culture, especially film. While some theorists equally interested in the energies and sensations of digital images draw more on phenomenological philosophies than on Deleuze, this broad concern with the experiential has produced two particularly significant effects for theorising new media.
First, the affective emphasis on the bodily rejects the distinction between vision and visuality so central to the cultural turn. Vision is as much corporeal as cultural in this work. Mark Hansen’s (2004) discussion of digital art, for example, claims that the human body becomes especially important in relation to digital images, and argues for ‘the refunctionalization of the body as the processor of information’ (Hansen 2004: 23). Indeed, bodies in this kind of work are understood as highly sensitive, sensorimotor information processors in constant, energetic relation with other human and nonhuman information processors. In affective work there is thus an emphasis on ‘a dynamism immanent to bodily matter and matter generally’ (Clough 2008: 1).

Secondly, the posthuman is not a person engaging with the world by interpreting and exchanging meanings (the figure evoked by Stuart Hall at the very beginning of this chapter). Understanding the posthuman in this sort of work does not involve the exploration of meaning, but rather the perceptual, experiential and sensory. Indeed, geographer Nigel Thrift (2008) has for some time been describing this sort of theory as addressing the non-representational. Nonrepresentational work is interested in articulating the perceptual, bodily, sensory experience created in encounters with specific materials (Beugnet and Ezra 2009). As Laura Marks says, ‘to appreciate the materiality of our media pulls us away from a symbolic understanding and toward a shared physical existence’ (Marks 2002: xii). Marks (2000, 2002) is a leading exponent of this affective approach to visual imagery. Like Hansen (2004), her arguments draw on both affective and phenomenological philosophical traditions. She describes watching artists’ videos, for example, as ‘an intercorporeal relationship’, suggesting that the video is as much a body as she is (Marks 2002: xix). Her aim is not to interpret what the videos mean, but to find richness and vitality in the images; hence she says that there is ‘no need to interpret, only to unfold, to increase the surface area of experience’ (Marks 2002: x). Marks’s work is also useful as a means of emphasising that, although digital technologies may have encouraged its emergence, this approach is by no means confined only to digital media. Deleuze himself wrote about analogue cinema and the oil paintings of Francis Bacon; and Marks’s work on video discusses both analogue and digital video. It is important, therefore, not to conflate the representational with the analogical and the affective with the digital.

Whether drawing on theories of representation or of affect, however, these stories about the increasing extent and changing nature of visual culture in modernity and postmodernity are not without their critics (see for example the debates in in the journal *October* [1996] and the *Journal of Visual Culture* [2001, 2003]). Two points of debate, for example, are the history and geography of this account. Jeffrey Hamburger (1997), to take just one example, argues that visual images were central to certain kinds of premodern, medieval spirituality, and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1998) have argued forcefully against the Eurocentrism that pervades
many discussions of ‘the visual’. Such work makes it clear that if a narrative of increasing ocularcentrism in the West can be told, it must be much more nuanced, historically and geographically, than has so far been the case (see also Brennan and Jay 1996; Cheetham et al. 2005). And the argument that a shift in visual culture is being driven by the digitalisation of much visual imagery has also been challenged. As Lev Manovich (2001) points out, many forms of digital imagery actually reproduce the visual conventions of other media. A lot of digital animation films, for example, still use the visual and narrative structures typical of the Hollywood movies made with analogue film. A lot of family photography continues to perform as it always has done, despite the use of digital technologies for taking, displaying and sharing family snaps (Rose 2010). And given the vast range of uses to which digital media are currently being put, Cubitt (2006) doubts that it is possible to generalise about the effects of digital media at all: there are just too many different kinds developing.

There are also debates about the social relations within which these visualities are embedded, and particularly about the effects of simulacra. Baudrillard, for example, has often been accused of uncritically celebrating the simulacrum without regard for the often very unequal social relations that can be articulated through it. Deleuze has also been criticised for his inattention to the power relations that define what is representable and what lies beyond representation. In contrast, the work of Donna Haraway (1991) is still taken by many as a salutary reminder of what is at stake in contemporary ocularcentrism (see also Clough 2008; Lister and Wells 2001; Sturken and Cartwright 2009). Like many others, Haraway (1991) notes the contemporary proliferation of visualising technologies in scientific and everyday use, and she characterises the scopic regime associated with these technologies thus: ‘vision in this technological feast becomes unregulated gluttony; all perspective gives way to infinitely mobile vision, which no longer seems just mythically about the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere, but to have put the myth into ordinary practice’ (Haraway 1991: 189). Haraway is concerned to specify the social power relations that are articulated through this particular form of visuality, however. She argues that contemporary, unregulated visual gluttony is available to only a few people and institutions, in particular those that are part of the ‘history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy’ (Haraway 1991: 188; and see Clough 2008). She argues that what this visuality does is to produce specific visions of social difference – of hierarchies of class, race, gender, sexuality, and so on – while itself claiming not to be part of that hierarchy and thus to be universal. It is because this ordering of difference depends on a distinction between those who claim to see with universal relevance, and those who are seen and categorised in particular ways, that Haraway claims it is intimately related to the oppressions and tyrannies of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy and so on. Given work done since Haraway made
this argument, it is now possible to say that these processes of visual categorisation can be both representational – by giving specific meanings to images – and nonrepresentational – by producing particular experiences from images (see, for example, Clough and Halley 2007).

For many theorists of both representation and nonrepresentation, then, there is thus a critical imperative to examine in detail how certain institutions mobilise specific forms of visuality to see, and to order, the world. If one dominant visuality denies the validity of other ways of representing social difference, Haraway insists that there are indeed other ways of seeing the world. If one dominant visuality is organising information and visual cognition to create specific flows, then Hayles (2006), for example, argues that other flows are possible. For Haraway and Hayles, as for many other writers, then, the dominant scopic regime of (post) modernity – whether analogue or digital – is neither an historical inevitability, nor is it uncontested. There are different ways of seeing the world, and the critical task is to differentiate between the social effects of those different visions. All these arguments make clear the necessity of understanding what social relations produce, and are reproduced by, what forms of visuality, and the next section explores this argument more fully.

These debates about visual culture have taken place largely across a range of humanities disciplines: literature, art history, philosophy, history. While cultural studies often straddles both the social sciences and the humanities, before moving on it is important to note that there is a further, quite distinct body of work, firmly located in the social sciences, which rather than ‘visual culture’ talks about visual research methods. This body of social science work uses various kinds of images as ways of answering research questions, not by examining images – as do visual culture studies – but by making them. Both anthropology and human geography have used visual images as research tools for as long as they have been established as academic disciplines, mostly photographs, diagrams and film in the case of anthropology, and photos, maps and diagrams in the case of geography. Visual sociology is a more recent development; although the earliest sociological journals carried photographs for a short period before the First World War, it was not until the 1960s that a book by an anthropologist encouraged some sociologists to pick up their cameras again (Collier 1967). Recent years have seen a proliferation of visual methodologies being used in a wide range of other disciplines (see for example Banks 2008; Emmison and Smith 2000; Hamilton 2006; Knowles and Sweetman 2004; Pink 2007; Pole 2004; Prosser 1998; Stanczak 2007), and this book addresses these methods in Chapter 11.

Oddly, there has been remarkably little dialogue between social scientists using visual research methods as a way of answering research questions, and visual culture scholars who study found images. This book uses the same framework to discuss both bodies of work, however. And it is also the case that an interest in how images can make you feel
something – that affective experiencing of an image – is a concern shared now by both some theorists of visual culture, as we have seen, and also by some social scientists interested in exploring how the affective infuses social life. Many social science scholars are experimenting with making images in order to explore the nonrepresentational aspects of the social (Pink 2007). So there are now social science scholars who have films and websites and photoessays, as well as books and journal articles, as an integral part of their academic work. While many of those scholars rely on the technical and creative expertise of filmmakers and website designers in particular to create fairly sophisticated pieces of work, there are also now plenty of software packages that are cheap and relatively easy to use, that allow you to edit a digital film, for example, or put together a basic website. So Chapter 11 of this book also spends some time exploring examples of such work, too.

So far, this chapter has given you an overview of what I see as the key aspects of the literatures currently exploring the visual. What I now want to do is to explain how the structure of this book draws on elements of those literatures to make sense of the proliferation of both images and ways to study them in recent years.

1.2 Understanding the Social Effects of Visual Materials

Visual culture critics have concentrated their energies on critically examining the effects of visual images already out there in the world, already part of visual culture, and Chapters 4 to 10 of this book discuss a range of methods for understanding such ‘found’ images. As I have already suggested, theorists of the cultural turn, with their emphasis on representation, have now been joined by theorists more concerned with the affective (other reviews can be found in Barnard 2001; Bird et al. 1996; Evans and Hall 1999; Manghani et al. 2006; Rampley 2005). Each of these bodies of work draws on a range of different theorists and philosophers, and each has its own internal debates and disagreements; moreover, the work of some philosophers and theorists is used to make arguments for both representation and nonrepresentation. This diversity obviously makes generalising about studies of visuality a difficult task. Nevertheless, I am going to suggest that there are five aspects of the recent literature that engages with visual culture that I think are valuable for thinking about the social effects of images.

The first point I take from the literature on (or against) ‘visual culture’ is its concern for the way in which images visualise (or render invisible) social difference. As Fyfe and Law (1988: 1) say, ‘a depiction is never just an illustration ... it is the site for the construction and depiction of
social difference’. One of the central aims of ‘the cultural turn’ in the social sciences was to argue that social categories are not natural but instead are constructed. These constructions can take visual form. This point has been made most forcefully by feminist and postcolonial writers who have studied the ways femininity and blackness have been visualised. An example would be Tanner Higgin’s (2009) discussion of the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) World of Warcraft. Tanner’s topic is the representation of race in World of Warcraft and he approaches it by noting not only that the characters in most computer and video games are white, but also that ‘black and brown bodies, although increasingly more visible within the medium, are seemingly inescapably objectified as hypermasculine variations of the gangsta or sports player tropes’ (Higgin 2009: 3). He then explores various reasons for the ‘commonsense notion that Blacks are not heroes, paladins, or mages’ and what he sees as the consequent lack of black bodies in World of Warcraft (Higgin 2009: 6). He notes that the game itself gives players white avatars by default, and that black skin choices are very limited; he discusses the importance of whiteness to the literary genre of high fantasy that games like World of Warcraft are related to; and he suggests that ‘when one sees a race called “human” within a MMORPG and it is westernized as well as White with different shades of color for diversity (but nothing too Black), a powerful assertion is made. This assertion is that humanity will only be understood within the fantasy world if it is primarily coded White. The player base has affirmed this understanding by choosing largely White human avatars in order to match the discursive framework set up by these racial logics’ (Higgin 2009: 11; Nakamura 2002, 2009). He concludes that, ‘because video games both model and shape culture, there is a growing danger and anxiety that some games are functioning as stewards of White masculine hegemony’ (Higgin 2009: 3).

Hence Fyfe and Law’s general prescription for a critical approach to the ways images can picture social power relations:

To understand a visualisation is thus to enquire into its provenance and into the social work that it does. It is to note its principles of inclusion and exclusion, to detect the roles that it makes available, to understand the way in which they are distributed, and to decode the hierarchies and differences that it naturalises. (Fyfe and Law 1988: 1)

Looking carefully at images, then, entails, among other things, thinking about how they offer very particular visions of social categories such as class, gender, race, sexuality, able-bodiedness, and so on.

Secondly, writers on visual culture, among others, are concerned not only with how images look, but how they are looked at. This is a key point
made by Maria Sturken and Lisa Cartwright’s (2009) book on visual culture, which they title *Practices of Looking*. They argue that what is important about images is not simply the image itself, but how it is seen by particular spectators who look in particular ways. Sturken and Cartwright (2009) take their inspiration on this point in part from an influential book written in 1972 by John Berger, called *Ways of Seeing*. Berger’s argument there is important because he makes clear that images of social difference work not simply by what they show but also by the kind of seeing that they invite. He uses the expression *ways of seeing* to refer to the fact that ‘we never look just at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves’ (Berger 1972: 9). His best-known example is that of the genre of female nude painting in Western art. He reproduces many examples of that genre (see Figure 1.2), pointing out as he does so the particular ways they represent women: as unclothed, as vain, as passive, as sexually alluring, as a spectacle to be assessed.

Berger insists though on who it is that does the assessing, who this kind of image was meant to allure:

In the average European oil painting of the nude, the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the painting and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. (Berger 1972: 54)

Thus for Berger, understanding this particular genre of painting means understanding not only its representation of femininity, but its construction of masculinity too. And these representations are in their turn understood as part of a wider cultural construction of gendered difference. To quote Berger again:

One might simplify this by saying: *men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between women and men but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (Berger 1972: 47, emphasis in original)

While later critics would want to modify aspects of Berger’s argument – most obviously by noting that he assumes heterosexuality in his discussion of masculinity and femininity – many critics would concur with his general understanding of the connection between image and spectator. Images work by producing effects every time they are looked at. Taking an image seriously, then, also involves thinking about how it positions you, its viewer, in relation to it.
Thirdly, there is the emphasis in the very term ‘visual culture’ on the embeddedness of visual images in a wider culture. Now, ‘culture’, as Raymond Williams (1976) famously noted, is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. It has many connotations. Most pertinent to this discussion is the meaning it began to be given in various anthropological books written towards the end of the nineteenth century. In this usage, culture meant something like ‘a whole way of life’, and even from the brief discussion in this chapter so far you can see that some current writers are using the term visual culture in just this broad sense. Indeed, one of the first uses of the term ‘visual culture’, by Svetlana Alpers (1983: xxv), was precisely to emphasise the importance of visual images of all kinds to many aspects of seventeenth century Dutch society. In this sort of work, it is argued that a particular, historically specific visuality was central to a particular, ocularcentric culture.

In order to be able to deal with questions of social difference and the power relations that sustain them, then, a notion of culture is required...
that can also address questions of social difference, social relations and social power. One means of keeping these sorts of differentiations in the field of visual culture in analytical focus is to think carefully about just who is able to see what and how, and with what effects. Indeed, Mitchell (1994: 420) argues that this is precisely the question that a concern for representation poses: ‘who or what represents what to whom, and where and why?’ Berger’s (1972) work is in some ways exemplary here. An image will depend for its effects on a certain way of seeing, as he argued in relation to female nude painting. But this effect is always embedded in particular cultural practices that are far more specific than ‘a way of life’. So Berger talks about the ways in which nude paintings were commissioned and then displayed by their owners in his discussion of the way of seeing which they express. Describing a seventeenth century English example of the genre, he writes:

Nominally it might be a *Venus and Cupid*. In fact it is a portrait of one of the king’s mistresses, Nell Gwynne ... [Her] nakedness is not, however, an expression of her own feelings; it is a sign of her submission to the owner’s feelings or demands. (The owner of both the woman and the painting.) The painting, when the king showed it to others, demonstrated this submission and his guests envied him. (Berger 1972: 52)

It was through this kind of use, by those particular sorts of people interpreting it in that kind of way, that this kind of painting achieved its effects. The seeing of an image thus always takes place in a particular social context that mediates its impact. It also always takes place in a specific location with its own particular practices. That location may be a king’s chamber, a Hollywood cinema studio, an avant-garde art gallery, an archive, a sitting room, a street. These different locations all have their own economies, their own disciplines, their own rules for how their particular sort of spectator should behave, including whether and how they should look, and all these affect how a particular image is seen too (for an early example of this sort of approach, see Becker 1982). These specificities of practice are crucial in understanding how an image has certain effects.

Fourthly, much of this work in visual culture argues that the particular ‘audiences’ (that might not always be the appropriate word) of an image will bring their own interpretations to bear on its meaning and effect. Not all audiences will be able or willing to respond to the way of seeing invited by a particular image and its particular practices of display (Chapter 10 will discuss this in more detail).

Finally, in all of this work there is an insistence that images themselves have their own agency. In the words of Carol Armstrong (1996: 28), for example, an image is ‘at least potentially a site of resistance and recalcitrance, of the irreducibly particular, and of the subversively
strange and pleasurable’, while Christopher Pinney (2004: 8) suggests that the important question is ‘not how images “look”, but what they can “do”’. In the search for an image’s meaning, it is therefore important not to claim that it merely reflects meanings made elsewhere – in newspapers, for example, or gallery catalogues. It is certainly true that visual images very often work in conjunction with other kinds of representations. It is very unusual, for example, to encounter a visual image unaccompanied by any text at all, whether spoken or written (Armstrong 1998; Wollen 1970: 118); even the most abstract painting in a gallery will have a written label on the wall giving certain information about its making, and in certain sorts of galleries there will be a sheet of paper giving a price too, and these make a difference to how spectators will see that painting. Mitchell (1994) coined the term image/text as a way of emphasising the interrelation of images and written texts. So although virtually all visual images are mixed in this way – they always make sense in relation to other things, including written texts and very often other images – they are not reducible to the meanings carried by those other things. The colours of an oil painting, for example, or the visible decay of video tape (Marks 2002), will carry their own peculiar kinds of visual resistance, recalcitrance, argument, particularity, strangeness or pleasure.

Thus I take five major points from current debates about visual culture as important for understanding how images work: an image may have its own visual effects (so it is important to look very carefully at images); these effects, through the ways of seeing mobilised by the image, are crucial in the production and reproduction of visions of social difference; but these effects always intersect with the social context of viewing and with the visualities spectators bring to their viewing.

1.3 Three Criteria for a Critical Visual Methodology

Given this general approach to understanding the importance of images, I can now elaborate on what I think is necessary for a ‘critical approach’ to interpreting found visual images. A critical approach to visual culture:

- takes images seriously. While this might seem rather a paradoxical point to insist on, given all the work I have just mentioned that addresses visualities and visual objects, art historians of all sorts of interpretive hues continue to complain, often rightly, that social scientists don’t look at images carefully enough. I argue here that it is necessary to look very carefully at visual images, and it is necessary to
do so because they are not entirely reducible to their context. Visual representations have their own effects.

- thinks about the social conditions and effects of visual objects. As Griselda Pollock (1988: 7) says, ‘cultural practices do a job which has major social significance in the articulation of meanings about the world, in the negotiation of social conflicts, in the production of social subjects’. Cultural practices like visual representations both depend on and produce social inclusions and exclusions, and a critical account needs to address both those practices and their cultural meanings and effects.

- considers your own way of looking at images. This is not an explicit concern in many studies of visual culture. However, if, as section 1.1.2 just argued, ways of seeing are historically, geographically, culturally and socially specific; and if watching your favourite movie on a DVD for the umpteenth time at home with a group of mates is not the same as studying it for a research project; then, as Mieke Bal (1996, 2003; Bal and Bryson 2001) for one has consistently argued, it is necessary to reflect on how you as a critic of visual images are looking. As Haraway (1991: 190) says, by thinking carefully about where we see from, ‘we might become answerable for what we learn how to see’. Haraway also comments that this is not a straightforward task (see also Rogoff 1998; Rose 1997). Several of the chapters will return to this issue of reflexivity in order to examine what it might entail further, and Chapter 12 will discuss the related issue of the ethics of using images in your research.

The aim of this book is to give you some practical guidance on how to do these things; but I hope it is already clear from this introduction that this is not simply a technical question of method. There are also important analytical debates going on about visualities. In this book, I use these particular criteria for a critical visual methodology to evaluate both theoretical arguments and the methods discussed in all the chapters, including visual research methods.

Having very briefly sketched a critical approach to images that I find useful to work with and which will structure this book’s accounts of various methods, the next chapter starts more explicitly to address the question of methodology.

**Summary**

Visual imagery is never innocent; it is always constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledges. A critical approach to visual images is therefore needed: one that thinks about the agency of the image, considers the social practices and effects of its viewing, and reflects on the specificity of that viewing by various audiences, including the academic critic.
Further reading

Stuart Hall, in his essay ‘The work of representation’ (1997b), offers a very clear discussion of the debates about culture, representation and power. A useful collection of some of the key texts that have contributed towards the field of visual culture has been put together by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall as *Visual Culture: The Reader* (1999). The collection of essays edited by Diarmuid Costello and Jonathan Vickery called *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers* (2007) contains some very useful essays on a range of philosophers and theorists, including Adorno, Barthes, Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Deleuze, Foucault, Mitchell and Pollock.