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RESEARCHING WITH VISUAL MATERIALS

A BRIEF SURVEY OF CONCEPTUAL DEBATES

Key words

affect
affordances
analogue
culture
digital
image/text
influencers
materiality
metadata
non-representational
ocularcentrism
operative image
platform
posthuman
recognisability
representations
scopic regime
simulacrum
softimages
spectacle
vision
visual culture
visual economy
visuality
ways of seeing

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 section explores a distinction between researching found images, and making images as part of a research process.
3. The third offers a broad analytical framework for understanding how images have social effects.
4. And the fourth suggests some more specific criteria for a critical approach to visual materials, which will be used to frame this book's discussion of different research methods.

2.1 An Introductory Survey of 'The Visual'

This section explores a number of the key concepts that have developed as ways of understanding visuality and images.

2.1.1 Culture and representation

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 older traditions of social and cultural analysis – especially the Marxist critique of mass culture offered by Theodor 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 and feelings that people have about it, and the practices that flow from those. 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 television 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. (1997a: 2)

Those meanings may be explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious, they may be felt as truth or as fantasy, science or common sense; and they may be conveyed through everyday speech, elaborate rhetoric, high art, television 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 – television 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, 2018). 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), a 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 over-arching 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. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977)

Michel Foucault explores the way in which many nineteenth-century institutions depended on various forms of surveillance (Chapters 10 and 11 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. In all this work, if in different ways, there is a sense in which representational images always claimed to make some kind of reference to a world that pre-exists its picturing.

The imbrication of visuality with colonialism, slavery and imperialism is especially important to note (Jay and Ramaswamy, 2014; Poole, 1997). Many studies have examined photographs produced in the context of colonial and imperial conquest, especially photographs taken by Western explorers, missionaries and colonial adminstrators of the people and places being colonised. Scholars such as Elizabeth Edwards (1992, 2001), James Faris (1996) and James Ryan (1997) have demonstrated that many of these photographs were given significance by nineteenth-century discourses and institutions which asserted absolute and visible differences between different 'races', and placed all races in a hierarchy of progress towards the 'civilisation' of the West. The 'political, economic, cultural, and social exploitation of visible human differences' (Weheliye, 2014: 4) continues to be evident in visual culture in two ways.

First, representations of black bodies – of bodies as black – continue to carry 'hateful' meanings, in the words of bell hooks (2015: ix). 'Opening a magazine or a book,' she says, 'turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy' (hooks, 2015: 1; and see Summers, 2017). hooks' work has been foundational in exploring dominant visual representations of black bodies, particularly in popular movies. She notes that black bodies are either represented sexually promiscuous (if female) or violent (if male); positive images aiming to celebrate blackness most often do so by mimicking white beauty, and she cites Beyoncé wearing a 'long bone-straight blonde hairdo' when she appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 2014 as an example (Twitter also asked why she was wearing what looked like underwear) (hooks, 2015: x). Other commentators are a little more optimistic than hooks about the representation of race in contemporary film and television. Ruha Benjamin, for example, points to hashtag campaigns like #OscarsSoWhite, and the television series produced by Shondaland, as examples that 'deliberately buck the Hollywood penchant for typecasting', but Benjamin also affirms that 'cosmetic diversity too easily stands in for substantive change' (Benjamin, 2019: 19).

The second way in which visual culture is argued to be racialised is through the field of visuality itself. Judith Butler (2009) uses the term **recognisability** to refer to this framing of what is visually perceptible. 'Recognizability characterizes the more general conditions that prepare or shape a subject for recognition'

(Butler, 2009: 5). Recognisability refers to what becomes noticable, or exposed (Benjamin, 2019): it regulates what bodies becomes visible and how. Simone Browne (2015) elaborates one contemporary example of the recognisability which makes some bodies visible in particular ways: the heightened visibility of black male bodies to the police. Because they become visible as inherently more likely to be criminal, a disproportionate number of Black men are stopped on city streets by police, arrested, beaten, imprisoned and murdered. Conversely, Browne notes, whiteness is constituted by the ability to surveil those bodies as black/criminal. Browne (2015) traces this form of recognisability in the US back to histories of slavery and forward to contemporary visual digital technologies, including facial recognition software which continues to strive to constitute racial difference visually (see also Benjamin, 2019; Raengo, 2013).

So, many writers have argued that Western modernity is ocularcentric and that forms of hierarchised social difference are inherent in its dominant scopic regimes. 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. The advent of what some cultural critics call 'postmodernity' signals a further shift in visual culture. Nicholas Mirzoeff (1998: 4), for example, argues that 'the postmodern is a visual culture'. Crucially though, in postmodernity, it is suggested, the modern relation between seeing and scientific 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 have become detached

from any certain relation to a real world with the result that we now live in a scopic regime dominated by simulacra.

The development of digital media has a special place in these discussions (Gane and Beer, 2008). While computing has a long history – the 'Analytical Engine' which Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace worked on in the 1830s has some claim to be the first computer – many commentators argue that the emergence of a wide range of digital production, storage and communication devices over the past twenty years has been part of a continued shift in visual culture. They argue not only that these inventions account in large part for the pervasiveness of visual images in Western societies now – because they make images so easy to make and share – 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 2.1). 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 Figure 3.2, 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: 250). Second, 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. Of course, 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, but this is a programmed process rather than an inherent 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 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 3-D model, as an instruction set for a manufacturing process, or another digital format that can be attached to the computer. (2006: 250)

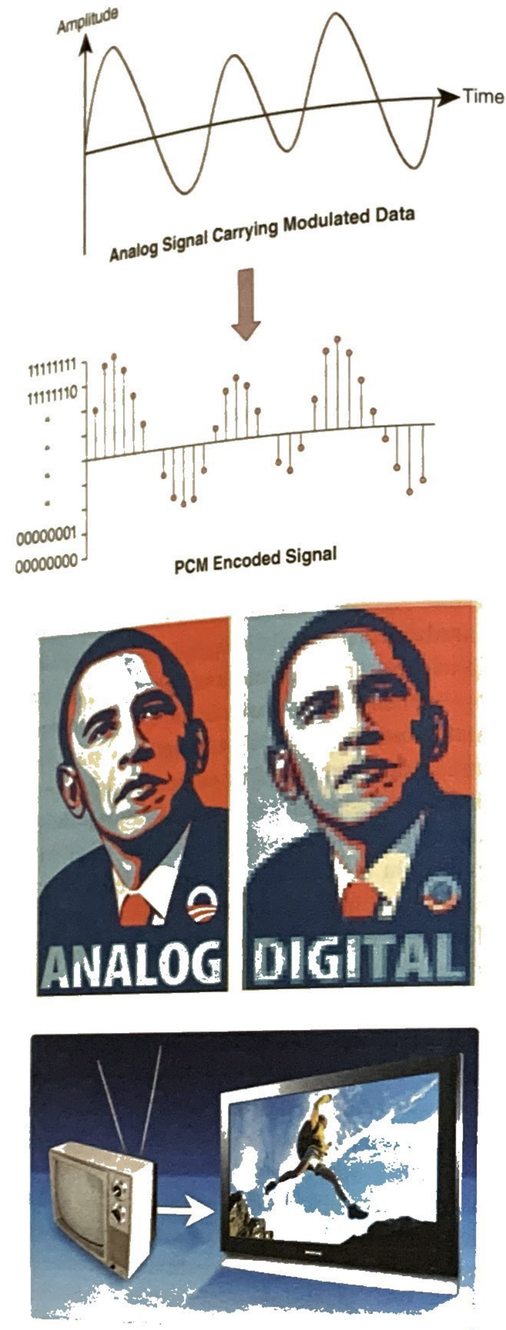

Figure 2.1 Some of the differences between analogue and digital images.

Scholarship on digital images has emphasised several key aspects of digital imagery:

- As noted by Cubitt (2006), because digital images are data files they are modifiable by software. Smartphone cameras do extensive processing of the data harvested by their sensors to produce a photograph's image file (Taffel, 2021), for example, and that file continues to be processed by software in order to be seen as an image. Pretty much every professionally-produced image you now see will have been digitally designed or digitally manipulated in some way, from the very elaborate visual effects in superhero movies, to the colour ranges in television series (think of the limited colours visible in so-called Nordic noir box sets).
- The same image file can be materialised in many different forms and in different locations, which may well invite different ways of seeing it: it can be printed out on paper and appear in a magazine or on a billboard, for example; it can also appear on a website homepage on a desktop or on a smartphone social media app (for a discussion of what happens to cinema in this context, see Casetti, 2013).
- Digital image files can be searched, categorised and organised by other software. Software can search not only the data from which the image appears but also the image file's **metadata**. Metadata is data about other data (Rubinstein and Sluis, 2013) and it is immanent to digital imagery. The use of software to query various kinds of digital images is widespread. The metadata of a cameraphone photo will carry the date on which the image file was created, for example; this allows the photoalbum app on your phone to sort your photos by date. Facial recognition software is another example of software analysing digital data: in this case, software automatically identifies and analyses the data that photographed faces have been converted into (McCosker and Wilken, 2020) (Figure 2.2 visualises some of the data generated by the everyday use of smartphone apps).
- Digital images are designed to be shared; they are always potentially networked (Rubinstein and Sluis, 2008), ready to be shared via the Internet on social media platforms among others. (A **platform** can be simply defined as a digital technology for bringing various data together.) An image file's metadata labels and formats an image file so that it is 'platform-ready' for uploading and searching (MacKenzie and Munster, 2019).
- Because taking photos with cameraphones and sharing them on social media platforms is so popular, there are unimaginably vast numbers of them. Martin Hand (2012) has described digital photographs as 'ubiquitous': their numbers are 'off the scale' (Dvořák and Parikka, 2021). Some authors therefore suggest that it makes little sense to explore individual digital images; rather, digital imagery should be approached en masse as an ensemble, an ecology, a territory or a sequence (see respectively MacKenzie and Munster, 2019; Manghani, 2013; Rose and Willis, 2019; Rubinstein and Sluis, 2008).

By no means every digital image will exemplify all of these aspects because this account depends in large part on analyses of the sharing of images on social media platforms. Other sorts of digital images – for example, digital photographs created for sale in art galleries, the value of which depends in part on their scarcity and which are protected by copyright laws – will not be shared in the same way. This suggests that while some of these aspects of digital images refer to technological aspects of digital images and platforms, other aspects depend on various social and cultural practices – like particular modes of (not) sharing photographs.

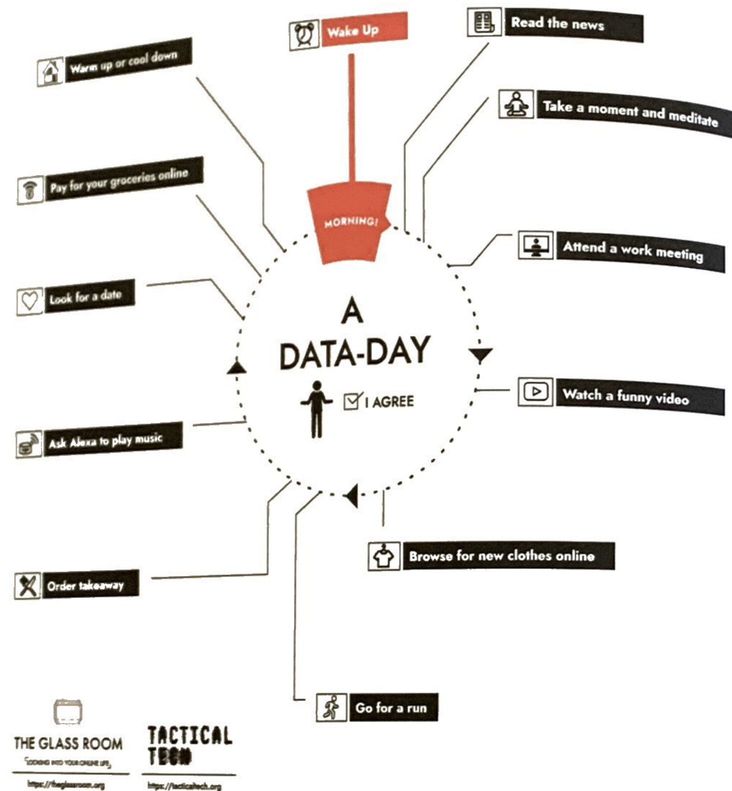

Figure 2.2 This figure has been adapted from a poster from the A Data-Day project by Tactical Tech, a non-governmental organisation which aims to 'explore and mitigate the impacts of technology on society'. The original poster gives examples of various apps that gather data about their users as they go about their everyday activities using the apps, and is available at https://cdn.ttc.io/s/theglassroom.org/world-bank-group/Data-Day-poster.pdf. © Tactical Tech.

While many accounts of digital images on social media and elsewhere emphasise their embedding in all kinds of social practices and institutions, there has also been increasing interest in the relevance of the effects of digital technologies on contemporary visual culture, as the next section explores.

2.1.2 Beyond representation: materiality and affect

For some, the difference between analogue and digital images is profound. David Rodowick (2007), for example, has argued that images made with digital cameras should 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 has particular visual qualities immanent in its analogue technology. As noted above, various scholars have explored the specificity of the materiality of digital images. Ingrid Hoelzl and Rémi Marie (2015), for example, focus on the intrinsic relationship between digital images and software, and describe digital images as **softimages** (see also Hansen, 2015). In their account, softimages are:

> the continuous actualization of networked data... The image is no longer a passive and fixed representational form, but is active and multiplatform... The image as the termination (fixation) of meaning gives way to the image as a network terminal (screen). It is no longer a stable representation of the world, but a programmable view of a database that is updated in real-time. It no longer functions as a (political and iconic) representation but plays a vital role in synchronic data-to-data relationships. (Hoelzl and Marie, 2015: 3-4)

A softimage is one data file among many, distributed across platforms, converted into an image via hardware and software, and if it is visible on a screen it is continually refreshed – as becomes evident if the screen image glitches or crashes.

Indeed, for some time now in the literature on visual culture, there has been an emphasis on the **materiality** of the media used to make and carry visual images, inspired by a range of theorists, including Bruno Latour and Friedrich Kittler (Packer and Crofts Wiley, 2012). In this work, the specific effects of a material object – a computer game, for example (Ash, 2015) – are understood through ontological claims about, in this case, the inherent qualities of its software and hardware as they shape its visuals.

There are different inflections to this claim. Sometimes the emphasis is on the way that a specific technology – the analogue camera, say – has a direct effect on the nature of the image it produces. This is the argument made by

Rodowick (2007) above, and has also been argued at length by Kittler (1999). Other authors suggest that the material qualities of technologies offer a limited number of possibilities – or **affordances** – for how they can be used, but that humans can choose between those possibilities. Sean Cubitt's (2014) recent history of visual technologies takes this position, as does Fernando Rubio (2012) in a study of work by the American artist Robert Smithson called *Spiral Jetty* (see Figure 2.3). Rubio suggests that, in fact, it wasn't only Smithson who made *Spiral Jetty*: so too did the rocks and rubble that form *Spiral Jetty*, the water of the lake it extends into, the ground pressure, the dumper trucks that carried the rocks ... the physical properties of all of these were active partners in Smithson's creative process, allowing him to do some of the things he wanted but preventing him from doing others. Rubio thus argues more generally that 'artistic production is a form of practice that emerges and unfolds from a material engagement within the world' (Rubio, 2012: 147; see also Rubio and Silva, 2013).

Figure 2.3 Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, built in 1970 into the Great Salt Lake, Utah. © Holt-Smithson Foundation/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2022.

The last couple of decades have in fact seen extended bodies of work emerge that explore the agency of material objects and the particularities of digital media, and often both at the same time. Both these bodies of work have questioned the utility of the notion of representation. At the end of the twentieth 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), a number of scholars began to argue for a different understanding, not just of particular types of images like digital photographs but (as already noted) 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 **posthuman** 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; see also Thrift, 2008), the scale and intensity of which has been immeasurably increased since the 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 that challenges the usefulness of the concept of representation. This is because, according to Ambrose (2007), 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 clichéd 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, in relation to both digital and analogue images. 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 three particularly significant effects for theorising images.

First, as this section has already suggested, these approaches to visuality are particularly attentive to the technological capacities and actions of the devices creating, picturing and circulating images. These approaches tend to emphasise the agency of these nonhuman aspects of visual culture. Here, the arguments of scholars like Rodowick (2007) and Hoelzl and Marie (2015) are relevant. Hoelzl and Marie (2015: 4), for example, define the effects of a softimage very much in terms of its technological materiality: their definition of a softimage is 'a programmable view of a database that is updated in real-time'. Moreover, as data, softimages are not only observed by humans. As already noted, digital images are also analysed by software programs. This can be the software on your phone that sorts your photos into date order – or it can be the sort of analyses conducted by, say, Facebook on all the photos uploaded by its users. This is extensive (and highly profitable): users' photographs are used by Facebook as

training sets to develop algorithms which can better learn how to classify images automatically. For some theorists, it is less the datafication of images and more the agency of these software analyses that has implications for the concept of representation. Referring to very large image datasets, MacKenzie and Munster (2019: 5) argue that:

> These contemporary image ensembles are not simply quantitatively beyond our imagining but qualitatively not of the order of representation. Their operativity cannot be seen by an observing 'subject' but rather is enacted via observation events distributed throughout and across devices, hardware, human agents and artificial networked architectures.

In this account, vision is not human, since images (as data) are seen (analysed) by software. Images are processed by software, not interpreted by humans. MacKenzie and Munster (2019) call this distributed observation 'invisuality', and Joanna Zylinska (2017) has described imaging practices from which humans are absent as 'nonhuman photography' (see also Hansen, 2015). (And at this point it is important to note the concept of the **operative image** developed by Harun Farocki (2004), which refers to images that do not represent an object but instead are part of an operation. His example is the camera on the nose of a warhead, which works not to create an image but to locate a target.)

Second, the affective emphasis on embodiment 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).

Third, following from both the previous points, 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, the experiential and the sensory. Indeed, geographer Nigel Thrift (2008) has for some time been describing this sort of theory as 'addressing the non-representational'. **Non-representational** work is interested in articulating the perceptual, bodily and 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' analogue 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).

Working with the notion of posthuman affect as embodied and non-representational has been taken up by several theorists of social media in particular, prompted by some of its specifically digital materiality. For example, the pervasiveness of interactions with social media in so many places – exemplifed by the ubiquity of shared images and the way that smartphone screens and their social media apps are the constant companions of so very many people now such that we might call them 'functional and sensorial prostheses' (Srnicek, 2014: 83) – suggests to many scholars that there is a need to understand what Paul Frosh (2019) describes as the everyday, routine, embodied 'co-habitation' with digital media. This co-habitation entails:

> neither the intensity of spectatorship nor the instrumentality of observation but into the mediate and sociable relationship of companionship, or being-with... this adjacency of mediated entities to our lives is often conveyed as a peripheral and background intuition, an embodied registration of ambient co-habitation rather than a direct epiphany or passionate engagement. (Frosh, 2019: xix)

Frosh (2019: xvii) suggests that 'ambient co-habitation' with digital media produces 'a perpetually circulating social and existential energy' which saturates and shapes everyday experience as a kind of atmosphere or environment. Many scholars have explored how specific digitally-mediated atmospheres feel. The circulations of digital media 'entail a panoply of affective attachments: articulations of desire, seduction, trust, and memory; sharp jolts of anger and interest; political passions; investments of time, labor, and financial capital; and the frictions and pleasures of archival practices' (Paasonen et al., 2015: 1; and see Dean, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015), and different kinds of atmospheric affective energies have been identified in relation, for example, to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Google Maps: navigation (Verhoeff, 2012); aspiration (Rangaswamy and Arora, 2016); entrapment (Sundaram, 2015); smartness (Rose and Willis, 2019); glamour (Hearn and Banet-Weiser, 2020). Another kind of ambient co-habitation is the saturation of urban environments with digitally-enhanced, digitally-sourced images that are more and more often displayed on large digital screens (Aiello, 2022;

Degen and Rose, 2022; Krajina, 2014; McQuire, 2016). Looking at the screens through which social media pass can thus be understood as an embodied, affective mode of visuality.

As well as accounts of images as representational, then, there are now various approaches to images which understand them as non-representational. The important methodological question, though, is the kind of attention given to images by these different approaches. That is, given these different theoretical approaches, what kind of investigative methods are brought to bear to explore specific kinds and aspects of representation and non-representation? There are no hard and fast answers here. Qualitative interpretation of a handful of individual images; quantitative analysis of hundreds or thousands; digital analysis of image data: all are possible and can be used in studies that understand images as representational or non-representational. The practical methodological implications of these theoretical debates will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 3 and 5.

For all their theoretical differences, however, it could be argued that theories of both representation and non-representationality have one thing in common: a commitment to a close engagement with specific images. Whether carefully unpacking layers of representational references, or sensitively responding to corporeal affects, all the scholars discussed so far take a very attentive stance towards their materials.

2.1.3 Debates

None of these stories about the increasing extent and changing nature of visual culture in modernity, postmodernity and beyond are without their critics, however (see for example the early debates 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 all these accounts of visual culture. 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'. These arguments have only gained momentum in recent years. The academic discipline of art history, for example, has been debating 'art and globalisation' for some time (Elkins et al., 2010; see also Casid and D'Souza, 2014): wondering if its foundational concepts, grounded as they are in both Western philosophy and Western art practice, can be relevant to artworks created in different visual cultural traditions (Grant and Price, 2020); devising expanded approaches that claim to encompass all kinds of art production everywhere (Davis, 2011); thinking about how to displace its Eurocentrism with insights from other philosophical and arts traditions; and worrying about erecting an overly-clear distinction between 'The West' and elsewhere. On the latter point, as many anthropologists have also pointed out, visual objects (not always seen as proper 'art' by Europeans) have been stolen, traded and gifted between places for hundreds of years (indeed, archaeologists would say for thousands of years). Anthropologist Poole (1997) uses the term **visual economy** to refer to the way in which visual objects are made mobile through many different kinds of exchange, sometimes commodified, sometimes not, being given different meanings and having different effects as they move through different places. Artists, photographers, filmmakers and so on have, of course, often also travelled. Boundaries between distinct visual cultures are therefore impossible to draw.

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) has pointed out, many forms of digital imagery actually reproduce the visual conventions of other media. A lot of popular digital animation films, for example, still use the visual and narrative structures typical of Hollywood animations 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). In their book on visual culture, Richard Howells and Joaquim Negreiros (2012) insisted that digital technologies simply offer new ways of delivering images that leave their content and meaning unchanged.

There are also debates about the social relations within which these visualities are embedded. 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, 2018). 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)

Some scholars of digital media suggest that digital technologies are only enhancing this apparent ability to be everywhere and see everything. Film scholar Thomas Elsaesser, for example, has discussed the resurgence of 3-D Hollywood movies as examples of what he describes as the 'new default value of digital

vision' (2013a: 240). This vision is immersive; it is a fluid, three-dimensional space into and through which movement is expected (think of the flying scenes in any superhero movie, where the camera swoops and flies in and over huge landscapes) and space is fluid, scaleable and malleable. Rather than offering a fixed viewpoint to its user, this digital vision invites us to enter into spaces by 'doing away with horizons, suspending vanishing points, seamlessly varying distance, *unchaining* the camera and transporting the observer' (Elsaesser, 2013a: 237; see also Hayles, 2012; Uricchio, 2011; Verhoeff, 2012) (see Figure 2.4).

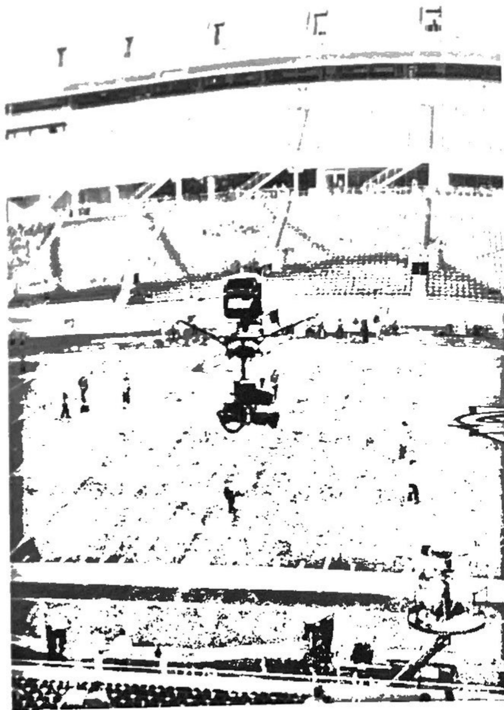

Figure 2.4 A photograph of a SkyCam. SkyCam is a cable-suspended camera system which moves through three dimensions in a stadium or arena, controlled by a pilot and a camera operator. It mobilises the viewing of sports events in ways similar to Elsaesser's description of the 'new default value of digital vision' (2013a: 240). Photo by elisfkc from Orlando, FL, United States, Skycam, CC BY-SA 2.0, from https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=54217365.

Another point of difference between accounts of visual culture that focus on representation and those that explore non-representation can be their understandings

of power and resistance. Critics focused on representation tend to look for the ways in which power relations are articulated through specific representations. They also look to other kinds of representations that articulate different kinds power dynamics through different kinds of images. Charlton McIlwain (2020), for example, describes how social media 'shoved a steel pipe through through the cogs driving the American image machine [when] they flooded the Web with images that painted the historically most feared – black people, and black men more particularly – as sympathetic victims' as part of #BlackLivesMatter protests (and see too Allison V. Richardson's [2020] discussion of 'bearing witness while black'). This form of protest implies challenging not only what is conventionally represented but also the dominant organisation of the visual field itself: that recognisability which arranges what can become visible as well as the meaning of what is visible. These re-arrangements are assertions of what Mirzoeff (2011) calls 'the right to look'. The right to look centres human agency (as argued by Couldry, 2020), and it is central to the work of bell hooks:

> For those of us who dare to desire differently, who seek to look away from the conventional ways of seeing blackness and ourselves, the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the status quo. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad. Making a space for the transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision, is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation. (hooks, 2015: 4)

For hooks, this is not necessarily a search for more accurate or realistic images (though for other critics who understand images as representational, it often is). For her, all identities are mediated by representations, visual and otherwise. Rather, it is about developing agential ways of seeing that articulate different kinds of identities for black bodies by interrogating, challenging and resisting racisms in and of the visual field.

This sense of oppositional resistance is found less often in work that considers images and visuality as non-representational. Given the emphasis on the pervasive and even constitutive qualities of affect, oppositional resistance is difficult to assert. Instead, because affect is always emergent, it is argued that it is always potentially able to form differently. Hence there tends to be an emphasis on the ways in which affects can be multiple and therefore can misalign and produce friction, jolts of surprise or even contradiction. Some accounts of the materiality of digital media emphasise breakdowns, glitches, decay and technological incompatabilities inherent to technologies as ways of undermining the power of big social media platforms, for example (on glitches, see Leszczynski, 2020; Nunes, 2011; Sundén, 2015). Other ways of seeing are sought, but in processes of ambivalence, emergence, contradiction and

recombination, rather than opposition. Crystal Abidin's (2021) overview of her work on internet influencers is an example of this approach (for other examples, see Degen and Rose, 2022; Frosh, 2019). First emerging in Southeast Asia in the mid-2000s, and now of various kinds, **influencers** create content on social media in order to influence the opinions and buying habits of their followers. Abidin explores young influencers' 'agentic and circumventive adaptations of what platforms offer them' (2021: 3) rather than their outright resistance. (And her mention of 'agentic' is an important reminder that there is no hard and fast distinction here between representational and non-representational discussions of power.) Her analysis situates influencer activity 'at the intersection of relatability politics, attention-gaming economies, and self-branding culture' (Abidin, 2021: 5), which make deciding whether any particular example of it offers a 'critical alternative' rather difficult. Instead, Abidin discusses parody and frivolity as ways in which influencers challenge platforms. Rather than 'resistance' to dominant meanings, Abidin (2021) works with the notion of the 'refraction' of social media conventions and norms.

Whether more interested in resistance or refraction, both approaches often point to the ways in much of the persistence and stability of contemporary visual culture – whether understood as representational or non-representational – is underpinned by capitalism's drive for profit. Hollywood movies repeat dominant forms of representing 'race' because, in a culture where many Black people as well as most white people have internalised racist visions of blackness (hooks, 2015), that is what sells movies. And no matter how frivolous or parodic, the vast majority of social media influencer activity is about selling commodities, whether that is products or celebrities. This is quite apart from the advertising revenues generated by the analysis of platform users' data, including their uploaded images, which allows highly targeted advertising on those platforms (Fuchs, 2021; Srnicek, 2016). Haraway extends this point when 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; see also Clough, 2008). She argues that what dominant forms of visuality do is to produce specific visions of social difference – of hierarchies of class, race, gender, sexuality and so on – while 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 non-representational – by producing particular experiences from images (see, for example, Ash, 2015; Clough and Halley, 2007).

Discussion

It is important to think about how power relations are also at play in what is made visible. This becomes particularly evident when thinking about the events that have followed the publication in various European magazines of cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. Most versions of Islam prohibit images of Muhammad. When a Danish magazine printed such cartoons in 2005, there were protests and demonstrations around the world, and in 2015 twelve people died in a violent attack on the offices of a French satirical magazine which had also carried cartoons satirising Islam by picturing Muhammad. Subsequent debates about free speech, secularism and religion were complex, but certainly made it clear that thinking about the social power relations in which images are embedded must now consider what is or is not appropriate to make visible in the first place. After the murders of the French cartoonists in 2015, for example, several commentators suggested that they were able to publish such cartoons because the Muslim population in France is largely poor and excluded from the cultural mainstream, so their religious convictions could be ignored more easily.

For many theorists of both representation and non-representation 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 (Mirzoeff, 2011). And regardless of whether one dominant visuality denies the validity of other ways of representing social difference, Haraway (1991) insists that there are indeed other ways of seeing the world, including ones that acknowledge their specificity and situatedness. 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. Similarly, Hito Steyerl (2012) suggests that the immersive visuality of many digital images may be the latest incarnation of the god trick; but it may also allow for other, less domineering, more provisional and more situated kinds of seeing. For Haraway, Hayles and Steyerl, as for many other writers, then, a dominant scopic regime – whether analogue or digital, representational or non-representational – is neither a 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 section 3 explores this argument more fully.

2.2 Visual Research Methods: Finding and Making Images

Before moving on though, this chapter needs to pause and remark on one particular example of the increasing pervasiveness of images: the growing interest

among many kinds of researchers, focused on different topics and with different theoretical orientations, in creating images as part of their research (Rose, 2014). In fact, there is a long history of making various kinds of images in the social sciences. 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 (Banks and Ruby, 2011; Pink, 2021), and photos, maps and diagrams in the case of geography (Dodge and Kitchin, 2011; Ryan, 1997). 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, however, have seen a proliferation of visual methodologies being used across the social sciences (see for example Banks, 2008; Bell, Warren and Schroeder, 2014; Emmison, Smith and Mayall, 2012; Gaimster, 2011; Hamilton, 2006; Hughes, 2012; Knowles and Sweetman, 2004a; Margolis and Pauwels, 2011; Pauwels and Mannay, 2020; Pink, 2012, 2015, 2021; Pole, 2004; Prosser, 1998; Reavey, 2011; Spencer, 2011; Stanczak, 2007; Theron, Mitchell and Smith, 2011; Thomson, 2008; Tinkler, 2012).

So far, the discussion in this chapter has implicitly been focusing on studies of what might be called 'found' images. Found images are not made by a researcher, but rather found by them. Many of the empirical and theoretical discussions about visual technologies, visual meanings and visual experiences that this chapter has surveyed so far have gone hand in hand with many studies of specific kinds of found images, and academic disciplines have grown up around some of them: history of art, film studies, television studies. There are also studies emerging of the images found on social media platforms (Burgess and Baym, 2020; Burgess and Green, 2018; Kaye, Zeng and Wikstrom, 2022; Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, 2020; McCracken et al., 2020; Serafinelli, 2018; Tiidenberg, Hendry and Abidin, 2021), their apps and some of the visuals peculiar to them like selfies and memes (Highfield and Leaver, 2016; Morris and Murray, 2018; Tiidenberg, 2018; Wiggins, 2019). Such studies are interested in exploring representational and non-representational aspects of found visual materials, and several chapters of this book focus on the sorts of methods most often used in this type of work. There is also an important and longstanding body of work on found images which examines how particular kinds of images are interpreted by their audiences and users, discussed in Chapter 12 here. Other relevant work has been done by anthropologists looking at how different things are done with photographs in different places, for example (see for example Appadurai, 1986a; Pinney and Peterson, 2003).

However, it is also important to note that over the past couple of decades, more and more researchers are creating visual images as part of their investigations. This is a second broad type of visual research methods. Sometimes some

kind of image is made by the researcher or research team themselves. Sometimes images are made in collaboration with research participants; or research participants are invited to create their own images which then serve as data for the research. Sometimes this sort of work addresses a research question which is concerned about some aspect of visual culture or visual experience. Sometimes, though, working with visual materials is designed as a means of answering a question that has nothing to do with visual issues per se: attitudes to illness, for example (Frith and Harcourt, 2007), or feelings about living in an informal settlement (Lombard, 2013). There are a number of reasons for the development of these visual research methods that create images. As will be discussed in Chapter 13, it has been claimed that asking research participants to make their own photographs or drawings or maps can be particularly effective in enabling particular kinds of participants to express themselves: visual research methods are often used by researchers working with young children, for example (Fleer and Ridgway, 2014; White, 2020). That is, these methods are argued to produce better data than other research methods, in some circumstances. It can also be argued that visual methods are especially appropriate to explore and evoke affective atmospheres. It is also often argued that making visuals can be a very effective way of sharing research results with non-academic audiences. Chapter 15 discusses some examples of researchers making films, comics and data visualisations in order to engage with audiences beyond the academy.

Oddly, little of this second type of work engages explicitly with the sorts of debates that this chapter has thus far been summarising, although it is certainly possible to detect parallels between discussions about contemporary visual culture and the various ways in which social scientists have used images (Rose, 2014). Some social scientists approach images as representational, for example, while others focus more on their affective qualities. And many social science researchers working with images are concerned about the sorts of questions raised by Haraway's (1991) account of visuality: debates about how images are part of the power relations between researcher and researched are framed as a discussion about research ethics. This book discusses the ethics of researching with visual materials in Chapter 4, and addresses several of the most commonly used research methods that depend on making images in Chapters 13 and 14.

2.3 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 7 to 12 and 14 of this book discuss a range of methods for

understanding such 'found' images. As the previous section outlined, theorists of the cultural turn, with their emphasis on representation, have now been joined by theorists more concerned with the non-representational and affective (other reviews can be found in Barnard, 2001; Evans and Hall, 1999; Heywood and Sandywell, 2012; Howells and Negreiros, 2012; Manghani, Piper and Simons, 2006; Manghani, 2013; Mirzoeff, 2009; 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 non-representation. 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 literatures that engage with visual culture which I think are valuable for thinking about the social effects of images. These are also important considerations when making images as part of a research project.

2.3.1 Visualising social difference

The first point I take from the literature on visual culture is its concern for the way in which images visualise 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, a point that 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 that not only are the characters in most computer and video games 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, when he was writing, the game itself gave players white avatars by default, and that black skin choices were 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; see also Nakamura 2002, 2008, 2009, 2014)

Higgin 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' (2009: 3, quoted in Betz, 2021).

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, sex and so on.

2.3.2 How images are looked at

Second, writers on visual culture, among others, are concerned not only with how images look, but also with how they are looked at. This is a key point made by Maria Sturken and Lisa Cartwright's (2018) 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 (2018) 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 *way 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, 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 white 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.

Much of this work in visual culture argues that the particular 'audiences' (this 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 12 will discuss this in more detail). Taking an image seriously, then, also involves thinking about how it positions its audience and how that audience engages with that positioning.

2.3.3 Differentiating visual cultures

Third, 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 from the 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 using the notion of culture in this broad sense, however, certain analytical questions may become difficult to ask. In particular, culture as a whole way of life can slip rather easily into a notion of culture as simply a whole, and the issues of differences within that culture – and its connections to other cultures – can become obscured. This is certainly evident in the debates generated by cartoons showing the prophet Muhammad, when 'the West' and 'Islam' were sometimes mistakenly described as separate and monolithic 'cultures' or 'civilisations'.

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, where and with what effects. Indeed, W. J. T. Mitchell (1994: 420) argues that this is precisely the question that a concern for representation poses: 'Who or what represents what to whom with what, and where and why?' Berger's (1972) work is in some ways exemplary here. An image will depend on a certain way of seeing for its effects, 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, with its specific audience and their established way of interpretation, that this type 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, or 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 (Rose, 2012). These specificities of practice are crucial in understanding how an image has certain effects, particularly when the 'same' image, circulating digitally, can appear in very different kinds of places.

2.3.4 The circulation of images

The way in which so many images now circulate online leads to the fourth element which I think can be usefully drawn out of current work on visual culture. Visual objects have always circulated between different places: from the artist's studio to the king's picture gallery; from a child's birthday party to a photo developing lab to a photo frame on a mantelpiece (Rose, 2010); from a photographer's studio in Mumbai to an archive in London (Pinney and Peterson, 2003). And ever since the invention of technologies of mass reproduction, images of visual objects have also been made and circulated. The German Marxist cultural critic Walter Benjamin wrote about this in the 1930s, exploring what he thought were the effects of photographing art objects so that most people came to 'see' such objects through photos of them rather than through directly experiencing them (Benjamin, 1973). There have therefore always been important questions to ask about how images circulate in the visual economy, why, and with what effects. Those questions remain necessary to pose to the massive numbers of images that are now shared on various social networking sites. The processes of circulation are therefore the fourth aspect of work on visual culture that is important to consider when thinking about the social effects of images.

2.3.5 The agency of images

Finally, 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"'. An image has its own agency, if you like, and 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. W. J. T. 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), or the blurriness of a badly made internet meme, will all carry their own peculiar kinds of visual resistance, recalcitrance, argument, particularity, banality, 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; 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, with how the image is circulated, and with the visualities spectators bring to their viewing.

2.4 Three Criteria for a Critical Visual Methodology

Given this chapter's 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 those five points to make sense of the proliferation of both images and ways to study them in recent years. This section elaborates on what I think is necessary for a 'critical approach' to interpreting found visual images. A critical approach to visual culture:

- takes images seriously. I argue here that it is necessary to look very carefully at visual images: both their visual content and their materiality. This is necessary because they are not entirely reducible to their context. Visual images have their own effects.
- thinks about the social conditions and effects of images and their modes of distribution. The cultural practices that create and circulate images 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. This point is relevant to researching with both found and made images.
- considers your own way of looking at images. This is not an explicit concern in many studies of visual culture. However, as section 2.3 just argued, ways of seeing are historically, geographically, culturally and

socially specific. Watching your favourite movie on a streaming platform for the umpteenth time at home with a group of mates is not the same as studying it for a research project. So – 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 von Falkenhauser, 2020; 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 4 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: Researching with Visual Materials

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 circulation and viewing, and reflects on the specificity of that viewing by various audiences and users, including the academic critic.

Further Reading

- Stuart Hall's essay 'The Work of Representation' (1997b) is a very clear discussion of the debates about culture, representation and power.
- *Visual Culture: The Reader* (1999), edited by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, is a useful collection of some of the key texts that contributed to the emergence of the field of visual culture.
- *Image Studies: Theory and Practice* by Sunil Manghani (2013) remains an excellent overview of visual culture studies.

- *Beyond the Mirror: Seeing in Art History and Visual Culture Studies* by Susanne von Falkenhausen (2020) is a careful account of some relevant key concepts in art history and visual culture studies, including representation, visuality and seeing.
- And for some provocations on the difference that digital media make to cultural analysis, take a look at John Hartley's book *Digital Futures for Cultural and Media Studies* (2012).