



Practices of Looking

An Introduction to Visual Culture



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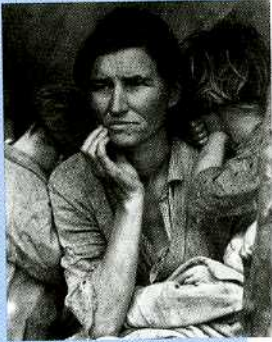


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Images, Power, and Politics

every day, we engage in practices of looking to make sense of the world. To those of us who are blind or have low vision, seeing and visibility are no less important than they are to those of us who are sighted, because the everyday world is so strongly organized around visual and spatial cues that take seeing for granted. Looking is a social practice, whether we do it by choice or compliance. Through looking, and through touching and hearing as means of navigating space organized around the sense of sight, we negotiate our social relationships and meanings.

Like other practices, looking involves relationships of power. To willfully look or not is to exercise choice and compliance and to influence whether and how others look. To be made to look, to try to get someone else to look at you or at something you want to be noticed, or to engage in an exchange of looks entails a play of power. Looking can be easy or difficult, pleasurable or unpleasant, harmless or dangerous. Conscious and unconscious aspects of looking intersect. We engage in practices of looking to communicate, to influence, and to be influenced. Even when we choose not to look, or when we look away, these are activities that have meaning within the economy of looking.

We live in cultures that are increasingly permeated by visual images with a variety of purposes and intended effects. These images can produce in us a wide array of emotions and responses. We invest the visual artifacts and images we create and encounter on a daily basis with significant power—for instance, the power to conjure an absent person, the power to calm or incite to action, the power to persuade or mystify, the power to remember. A single image can serve a multitude of purposes, appear in a range of settings, and mean different things to different people.

This image of women and schoolchildren looking at a murder scene in the street dramatically draws our attention to practices of looking. The photograph was taken by Weegee, a self-taught photographer of the mid-twentieth century whose real name was Arthur Fellig. The name *Weegee* is a play on the board game called Ouija, because he showed up at crime scenes so quickly that it was joked he must have supernatural psychic powers. He was known for his hard-core depictions of crime and violence in the streets of New York. Weegee listened to a police radio he kept in his car in order to arrive at crime scenes quickly, then, while onlookers watched, he would develop the photographs he took in the trunk of his car, which was set up as a portable darkroom.

“A woman relative cried... but neighborhood dead-end kids enjoyed the show when a small-time racketeer was shot and killed,” states the caption accompanying this image, titled “The First Murder,” in Weegee’s 1945 publication *Naked New York*.¹ On the facing page is displayed a photograph of what the children saw: the

FIG. 1.1

Weegee (Arthur Fellig), *The First Murder*, before 1945



dead body of a gangster. In *The First Murder*, Weegee calls attention to both the act of looking at the forbidden scene and the capacity of the still camera to capture heightened fleeting emotion. The children are gawking at the murder scene with morbid fascination, ignoring the bawling relative. As viewers, we look with equal fascination on the scene, catching the children in the act of looking, their eyes wide with shock and wonder. We also witness the woman crying. Her eyes are closed, as if to shut out the sight of her dead relative. Near her another woman, the only other adult in the photograph, lowers her eyes, averting her look in the face of something awful. This is an adult practice that serves as a counterpoint to the children's bold first look at murder to which the title draws our attention.

The role of images in providing views of violence, and of voyeurism and fascination with violence, is countered by a history of using images to expose the devastating aspects of violence. One particularly graphic historical example of this use of images was the wide circulation of an image of Emmett Till, a boy who was murdered during the beginning of the civil rights movement in the United States. Till, a 14-year-old young black man from Chicago, was visiting relatives in a small Mississippi town in August 1955. In the context of the strict codes of Jim Crow segregation, he allegedly whistled at a white woman. In retaliation for this act, he was kidnapped by white men, tortured (his eye gouged out), beaten, and shot through the head, then thrown into the Tallahatchie River with a gin mill tied to his neck with barbed wire. Till's mother, recognizing the power of visual evidence, insisted on holding an open-casket funeral. She allowed his corpse to be photographed so everyone could see the gruesome evidence of violence exacted upon her son. The highly publicized funeral, which brought 50,000 mourners, and the graphic photograph of Till's brutalized body (fig. 1.3), which was published in *Jet* magazine, were major catalysts of the nascent civil rights movement. This image showed in shockingly graphic detail the violence that was enacted on a young black man for allegedly whistling at a white woman. It represented the violent oppression of blacks in the time period. In this image, the power of the photograph to provide evidence of violence and injustice is coupled with the photograph's power to shock and horrify.



FIG. 1.2

Weegee working in the trunk of his Chevrolet, 1942



FIG. 1.3

Photograph of Emmett Till's brutalized body in his casket, 1955

Representation

Representation refers to the use of language and images to create meaning about the world around us. We use words to understand, describe, and define the world as we see it, and we also use images this way. This process takes place through systems such as language that are structured according to rules and conventions.

A language has a set of rules about how to express and interpret meaning. So do the systems of representation used in painting, drawing, photography, cinema, television, and digital media. Although these systems of representation are not languages, they are in some ways *like* language systems and therefore can be analyzed through methods borrowed from linguistics and semiotics.

Throughout history, debates about representation have considered whether representations reflect the world as it is, mirroring it back to us through mimesis or imitation, or whether we construct the world and its meaning through representations. In this book, we argue that we make meaning of the material world through understanding objects and entities in their specific cultural contexts. This process of understanding the meaning of things in context takes place in part through our use of written, gestural, spoken, or drawn representations. The material world has meaning and can be "seen" by us only through representations. The world is not simply reflected back to us through representations that stand in for things by copying their appearance. We construct the meaning of things through the process of representing them. Although the concept of mimesis has a long history, today it is no longer accepted that representations are mere copies of things as they are or as the person who created them believes they ought to be.

The distinction between the idea of reflection, or mimesis, and representation as a construction of the material world can be difficult to make. The still life, for instance, has been a favored genre of artists for many centuries. One might surmise that the still life is motivated by the desire to reflect, rather than make meaning of, material objects as they appear in the world. In this still life, painted in 1765 by French painter Henri-Horace Roland de la Porte, an array of food and drink is carefully arranged on a table and painted with attention to each minute detail. The objects, such as the fruit, the bowl and cup, and the wooden tabletop, are rendered with close attention to light and detail. They seem so lifelike that one imagines one could touch them. Yet, is this image simply a reflection of this particular scene,



FIG. 1.4

Henri-Horace Roland de la Porte,
Still Life, c. 1765

rendered with skill by the artist? Is it simply a mimetic copy of a scene, painted for the sake of showing us what was there?

Roland de la Porte was a student of Jean-Batiste-Siméone Chardin,

a French painter who was fascinated with the style of the seventeenth-century Dutch painters, who developed techniques of pictorial realism more than a century before the advent of photography. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century still life ranged from paintings that were straightforwardly representational to those that were deeply symbolic. This painting includes many symbols of rustic peasant life. It invokes a way of living even without the presence of human figures. Elements such as food and drink convey philosophical as well as symbolic meanings, such as the transience of earthly life through the ephemeral materiality of basic, humble foods. The fresh fruits and wildflowers evoke earthy flavors and aromas. The crumbs of cheese and the half-filled carafe conjure the presence of someone who has eaten this simple meal.

In 2003, artist Marion Peck produced this painting, *Still Life with Dralas*, in the style of the Roland de la Porte still life. *Drala* is a term used in Buddhism to refer to energy in matter and the universe. Peck, a contemporary pop surrealist painter, interprets Roland de la Porte's still life to contain a kind of anthropomorphic energy in the rendering of the fruit and the dishes and glassware, which she brings to life with comic little faces. The painting holds an abundance of looks. Each tiny grape contains an eyeball. The conventions of painting used in the eighteenth-century work are understood to convey realism according to the terms of that era. In Peck's contemporary painting, the genre of the still life is subject to a kind of reflexive interpretation that humorously animates and makes literal its meanings, emphasizing possible metaphysical values



FIG. 1.5

Marion Peck, *Still Life With Dralas*, 2003

contained in the original painting's symbolism. Here, we want to note that that these paintings produce meanings through the ways that they are composed and rendered, and not just in the choices of objects depicted.

FIG. 1.6

René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images (This is Not a Pipe)* [*La Trahison des images (Ceci n'est pas une pipe)*], 1928–29

We learn the rules and conventions of the systems of representation within a given culture. Many artists have attempted to defy those conventions, to break the rules of various systems of representation, and to push the boundaries of definitions of representation. This painting, by the Belgian Surrealist artist René Magritte,





FIG. 1.7

René Magritte, *Les Deux Mysteres* (*The Two Mysteries*), 1966

comments on the process of representation. Entitled *The Treachery of Images* (1928–1929), the painting depicts a pipe with the line in French, “This is not a pipe.” One could argue, on the one hand, that Magritte is making a joke, that of course it is an image of a pipe that he has created. However, he is also pointing to the relationship between words and things, as this is not a pipe itself but rather the representation of a pipe; it is a painting rather than the material object itself. Magritte produced a series of paintings and drawings on this theme, including *The Two Mysteries* (1966), a painting in which a pipe is rendered ambiguously as floating in space either behind, in front of, or just above a painting of a pipe, with the same witty subscript, propped on an easel. Here, we have two pipes—or rather, two drawings of the same pipe—or a painting of a pipe and a painting of a painting of a pipe and a subscript identifying it. French philosopher Michel Foucault elaborated on Magritte’s ideas by exploring these images’ implied commentary about the relationship between words and things and the complex relationship between the drawing, the paintings, their words, and their referent (the pipe).² One could not pick up and smoke this pipe. So Magritte can be seen to be pointing out something so obvious as to render the written message absurd. He highlights the very act of labeling as something we should think about, drawing our attention to the word “pipe” and the limits of its function in representing the object, as well as the limits of the drawing in representing the pipe. Magritte asks us to consider how labels and images produce meaning yet cannot fully invoke the experience of the object. Negations, Foucault explains, multiply, and the layers of representation pile on one another to the point of incoherence. As we stop to examine the process of representation in this series by Magritte, we can see how the

most banal and everyday, sensible uses of representation can so easily fall apart, can be simply silly. In many of his other visual works, Magritte demonstrated that between words and objects one may create new relations and meanings through juxtaposition and changing contexts.

Magritte's painting is famous. Many artists have played off of it. The cartoon artist Scott McCloud, in his book *Understanding Comics*, uses Magritte's *Treachery of Images* to explain the concept of representation in the vocabulary of comics, noting that the reproduction of the painting in his book is a printed copy of a drawing of a painting of a pipe, and following this with a hilarious series of pictograms of icons such as the American flag, a stop sign, and a smiley face, all drawn with disclaimers attached (this is not America, this is not law, this is not a face). The digital theorist Talan Memmott, in a work of digital media called *The Brotherhood of the Bent Billiard*, offers a "hypermediated art historical fiction" about Magritte's *Treachery* and the generations of textual and visual interpretations it spawned. Book One of *The Brotherhood* traces the development of the pipe as an emblem from its first appearance in a painting of 1926 to the famous works reproduced here. In Memmott's piece, Magritte's image play with meaning and representation is the impetus for the production of a reauthored narrative of Magritte that is an opportunity for considering meaning and representation in the era of digital imaging. Memmott describes his work as a "narrative hack" of the complex system of allegories and symbols built up over Magritte's career, referred to as his "symbolic calculus."³ As these examples all make clear, today we are surrounded by images that play with representation, unmasking our initial assumptions and inviting us to experience layers of meanings beyond the obvious or the apparent real or true meaning.

The Myth of Photographic Truth

Throughout its history, photography has been associated with realism. But the creation of an image through a camera lens always involves some degree of subjective choice through selection, framing, and personalization. It is true that some types of image recording seem to take place without human intervention. In surveillance videos, for instance, no one stands behind the lens to determine what and how any particular event should be shot. Yet even in surveillance video, someone has programmed the camera to record a particular part of a space and to frame that space in a particular way. In the case of many automatic video and still-photography cameras designed for the consumer market, aesthetic choices such as focus and framing are made as if by the camera itself, yet in fact the designers of these cameras also made decisions based on social and aesthetic norms and standards concerning elements such as depth of focus and color. These selections are invisible to the user—they are black-boxed, relieving the photographer of the need to make various formal decisions. It remains the photographer who frames and takes the image, not the camera itself. Yet, despite the subjective aspects of the act of taking a picture, the aura of machine objectivity clings to mechanical and electronic images. All camera-generated images,

be they photographic, cinematic, electronic, or digital, bear the cultural legacy of still photography, which historically has been regarded as a more objective practice than, say, painting or drawing. This combination of the subjective and the objective is a central tension in our regard of camera-generated images.

Photography, the technique in which light rays reflecting off objects pass through a lens and register an imprint on a medium such as silver halide film (or, in the case of digital photography, a digital chip), was developed in Europe during the mid-nineteenth century, when concepts of positivist science held sway. Positivism, a philosophy that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, holds that scientific knowledge is the only authentic knowledge and concerns itself with truths about the world. In positivism, the individual actions of the scientist came to be viewed as a liability in the process of performing and reproducing experiments, as it was thought that the scientist's own subjective actions might influence the outcome or skew the objectivity of the experiment. Hence, in positivism, machines were regarded as more reliable than unaided human sensory perception or the hand of the artist in the production of empirical evidence. Photography seemed to suit the positivist way of thinking because it is a method of producing representations through a mechanical recording device (the camera) rather than the scientist's subjective eye and hand (using pencil to sketch a view on paper, for example). In the context of positivism, the photographic camera could be understood as a scientific tool for registering reality more accurately.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, there have been many arguments for and against the idea that photographs are objective renderings of the real world that provide unbiased truth. Some advocates of photography held that cameras render the world in a perspective that is detached from a subjective, particular human viewpoint because the conventions of the image are for the most part built into the apparatus. Others emphasized the role of the photographer in the subjective process of choosing, composing, lighting, and framing scenes. These debates have taken on new intensity with the introduction of digital imaging processes. A photograph is often perceived to be an unmediated copy of the real world, a trace of reality skimmed off the very surface of life, and evidence of the real. Photographs have been used to prove that someone was alive at a particular time and place in history. For instance, after the Holocaust, some survivors sent photographs to their families from whom they had long been separated as an affirmation that they were alive.

The French theorist Roland Barthes famously noted that the photograph, unlike a drawing, offers an unprecedented conjunction between what is here now (the image) and what was there then (the referent, or object, thing, or place).⁴ This conjunction relies on a myth of photographic truth. When a photograph is introduced as documentary evidence in a courtroom, it is often presented as if it were incontrovertible proof that an event took place in a particular way and in a particular place. As such, it is perceived to speak the truth in a direct way. Barthes used the term *studium* to describe this truth function of the photograph. The order of the *studium* also refers to the photograph's ability to invoke a distanced appreciation for what the image holds. At the same time, the truth-value of photography has been the focus of skepticism

and debate, in contexts such as courtrooms, about the different "truths" that images can tell and the limits of the image as evidence. That is why we refer to photographic truth as a myth. The contestation of truth in photographs has come into question with special urgency with the more increasing use since the 1990s of digital editing software, which allows photographs to be manipulated with much greater ease than ever before. Barthes referred to photographic truth as myth not because he felt that photographs do not tell the truth but because he regarded truth as always culturally inflected, never pure and uninfluenced by contextual factors. For Barthes, there is no singular truth to be identified outside the myths or ideologies of cultural expression.

Photographs are also objects in which we invest deep emotional content. They are one of the primary means through which we remember events, conjure up the presence of an absent person, and experience longing for someone we have lost or someone we desire but whom we have never seen or met. They are crucial to what we remember, but they can also enable us to forget those things that were not photographed. Photographs are objects that channel affect in ways that often seem magical. Roland Barthes once wrote that photographs always indicate a kind of mortality, evoking death in the moments in which they seem to stop time.⁵ Barthes coined the use of the term *punctum* to characterize the affective element of those certain photographs that pierce one's heart with feeling. The meaning of photographs can thus be seen as somewhat paradoxical in that they can be emotional objects through the *punctum*, or the emotionally piercing quality, yet they can also, through the effect of the *studium*, serve as banal traces of the real, documentary evidence of something that simply *has happened*. Photographic meaning derives precisely from this paradoxical combination of affective and magical qualities and the photograph's cultural status as cold proof. Artist and theorist Allan Sekula proposes: "photographs achieve semantic status as fetish objects *and* as documents. The photograph is imagined to have, depending on its context, a power that is primarily affective or a power that is primarily informative. Both powers reside in the mythical truth-value of the photograph."⁶

It is an additional paradox of photography that, although we know that images can be ambiguous and are easily manipulated or altered, particularly with the help of digital technology, much of the power of photography still lies in the shared belief that photographs are objective or truthful records of events. Our awareness of the subjective nature of imaging is in constant tension with the legacy of objectivity that clings to the cameras and machines that produce images today, even as the increasing availability of digital imaging software makes the alteration of photographs both easy and widespread.

The images created by cameras can be simultaneously informative and expressive. This photograph was taken by Robert Frank while he was traveling around the United States from 1955 to 1957 on two Guggenheim fellowships awarded to him to document American life at every strata. Eighty-three photographs selected from 687 rolls of film (more than 20,000 photographs) he took over two years were published as *The Americans*, a photographic essay with an introduction by the Beat poet Jack



FIG. 1.8

Robert Frank, *Trolley—New Orleans*, 1955. © Robert Frank, from *The Americans*

Kerouac.⁷ The photograph reproduced here documents passengers on a segregated city trolley in New Orleans—a white matron looking suspicious, a white boy in his Sunday best, a black man looking mournful. As a factual piece of evidence about the past, it records a particular moment in time in the racially segregated American South of the 1950s. Yet, at the same time, this photograph, titled *Trolley—New Orleans* (1955), does more than document these particular facts. For some viewers, this image is moving insofar as it connotes a culture on the precipice of momentous change, evoking powerful emotions about the history of segregation and the racial divide in America encapsulated in this chance look into the windows of a passing trolley. The picture was taken just as laws, policies, and social mores concerning segregation began to undergo radical changes in response to civil rights activism and, in particular, to the United States Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling against segregation and the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955–1956, which followed Rosa Parks's famous refusal to move to the back of the bus (a few months after the publication of the Emmett Till image we discussed earlier). In Frank's photograph, the faces of the passengers each look outward with different expressions, responding in different ways to their lives, their journey. It is as if the trolley itself represents the passage of history, and the expressive faces of each passenger frozen in a fleeting moment of transit here foreshadow the ways in which each one will confront and perform his or her place in the history that will ensue. The trolley riders seem to be held for one frozen, pivotal moment within the vehicle, a group of strangers thrown together to

journey down the same road that would become so crucial to American history, just as the civil rights era in the South brought together strangers in a political journey toward major social change.

Thus this photograph is valuable both as an empirical document of what has been and as an expressive, symbolic vehicle of what was at that moment and what would soon be. The power of the image derives not only from its status as photographic evidence of this exact moment in time but also from its powerful evocation of the personal and political struggles of the era that encompasses this moment. The photograph thus has the capacity both to present evidence and to evoke a magical or mythical quality that moves us beyond specific empirical truths.

In *Trolley—New Orleans*, as in all images, we can discern multiple levels of meaning. Roland Barthes uses the terms *denotative* and *connotative* to describe different kinds and levels of meaning produced at the same time and for the same viewers in the same photograph. An image can denote certain apparent truths, providing documentary evidence of objective circumstances. The denotative meaning of the image refers to its literal, explicit meaning. The same photograph may connote less explicit, more culturally specific associations and meanings. Connotative meanings are informed by the cultural and historical contexts of the image and its viewers' lived, felt knowledge of those circumstances—all that the image means to them personally and socially. As we noted, this Robert Frank photograph denotes a group of passengers on a trolley. Yet clearly its meaning is broader than this simple description. This image connotes a collective journey of life and race relations in the American South in the 1950s. A viewer's cultural and historical knowledge that 1955 is the same year in which the Montgomery bus boycotts took place and that the photograph was taken shortly after the *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation ruling potentially contributes to the photograph's connotative messages. The dividing line between what an image denotes and what it connotes can be ambiguous, and connotative meanings can change with changes in social context and over time. It can be argued that all meanings and messages are culturally informed—that there is no such thing as a purely denotative image. The two concepts, denotation and connotation, can be useful, however, because they help us to think about the ways in which images both function narrowly to signify literal, denoted meanings and also go beyond that to connote culturally and contextually specific meanings.

We have been discussing the myth of photographic truth. Roland Barthes used the term *myth* in a slightly different way to refer to the cultural values and beliefs that are expressed through connotation. For Barthes, myth is the hidden set of rules and conventions through which meanings, which are specific to certain groups, are made to seem universal and given for a whole society. Myth thus allows the connotative meaning of a particular thing or image to appear to be denotative, literal, or natural. For instance, Barthes argued that a French advertisement for a particular brand of Italian sauce and pasta is not simply presenting a product but is engaging in, as well as helping to produce, a myth or stereotype about Italian culture—the

concept of "Italianicity."⁸ This connoted message, wrote Barthes, is not for Italians but is specifically for a French audience, for whom the advertisement fosters a particular romanticized sense of what constitutes true Italian culture. Similarly, one could argue that contemporary representations of beauty (ultra-thin bodies, for example) promote the idea that certain body types and shapes are universally regarded as attractive. These standards constitute a myth in Barthes's terms (what some feminist critics have described as the feminine beauty myth) because they are historically and culturally constructed, not given or "natural." We all "know" this body to be the standard of beauty when we see it, not because it is simply naturally true that such bodies are objectively more beautiful than other types but because the connotative message has become so widely incorporated as to seem obvious and natural. In this way, denotative meanings can help to feed the production of connotative meaning, and connotative meanings can become more explicit and generic.

Barthes's concepts of myth and connotation are particularly useful in examining notions of photographic truth. Context influences our expectations and uses of images with respect to their truth-value. We do not, for example, bring the same expectations about the representation of truth to advertisements or film images that we view in a movie theater that we do to newspaper photographs or television news images. Significant differences among these forms include their relationship to time—does the image document something happening now, as television sometimes does, or is the event past?—and their ability to be widely reproduced. Whereas conventional photographs and films need to be developed and printed before they can be viewed and reproduced, the electronic nature of television images means that they are instantly viewable and can be transmitted around the world live, and the immediate realization of digital images makes them instantly available. Liveness and immediacy can contribute to the truth-value of an image. As moving images, cinematic and television images are combined with sound and music in narrative arrangements. Their meaning often lies in the sense we make of the sequence of images as they compose an overall story and the relationship of the image to sound, which we understand as having been produced and designed. We know better than to look for empirical evidence in fiction film images.

Similarly, the cultural meanings of and expectations about computer and digital images are different from those of conventional photographs. Because digital computer images can easily be made to look like conventional analog photographs, people who produce them sometimes play with the conventions of photographic realism. For example, an image generated exclusively by computer graphics software can be made to appear to be a photograph of actual objects, places, or people, when in fact it is a simulation, that is, it does not represent something in the real world. There is no expectation, in digital imaging, of the camera "having been there" to document something that really happened, which we see here and now in the image. Digital simulations of photographs imitate photographs of real phenomena using mathematical formulas translated into visual coordinates that approximate



FIG. 1.9

Nancy Burson, *First Beauty Composite: Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, Sophia Loren, and Marilyn Monroe* and *Second Beauty Composite: Jane Fonda, Jacqueline Bisset, Diane Keaton, Brooke Shields, and Meryl Streep*, 1982

photographic conventions of space. The difference resides in the fact that the process of producing a digital image does not require that the referent (the actual object, person, or place) is present or even that the referent exists. In addition, digital imaging software programs can be used to modify or rearrange the elements of a “realistic” photograph, erasing elements or introducing features that were not really there at the time of the picture’s taking or suggesting events that in fact did not happen—such as staging a diplomatic handshake by combining photographs taken of two world leaders at different times and places or morphing the faces of famous women into a composite of conventions of beauty, as the photographer and artist Nancy Burson has done. In this 1982 image, Burson used early digital technologies to make a composite of images of Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn, Sophia Loren, Grace Kelly, and Marilyn Monroe, famous beauties of the 1950s, juxtaposed with a composite of stars of the 1980s (Jane Fonda, Jacqueline Bisset, Diane Keaton, Brooke Shields, and Meryl Streep). Together these two images evoke the idea that different looks are favored and become the standard in different eras. Moreover, there is no one ideal beauty. Rather, our standards derive from a range of types. Yet certain notions of beauty are standardized, such as whiteness, symmetry, and full lips. Widespread use of digital imaging technologies since the 1990s has dramatically altered the status of the photograph relative to truth claims, particularly in the news media. Digital imaging thus can be said to have partially eroded the public’s trust in the camera image as evidence, even as the truth-value of the photograph clings to digital images. The meaning of an image and our expectations of that image are thus tied to the technology through which it is produced, even if that technology has undergone radical change, as photography has since the 1990s. We discuss this issue further in chapter 5.

Images and Ideology

To explore the meaning of images is to recognize that they are produced within dynamics of social power and ideology. Ideologies are systems of belief that exist

within all cultures. Images are an important means through which ideologies are produced and onto which ideologies are projected. When people think of ideologies, they often think in terms of propaganda—the crude process of using false representations to lure people into holding beliefs that may compromise their own interests. This understanding of ideology assumes that to act ideologically is to act out of ignorance. In this particular sense, the term *ideology* carries a pejorative cast. However, ideology has come to be understood as a much more pervasive, mundane process in which we all engage and about which we are all for the most part aware, in some way or other. In this book, we define ideologies as the broad but indispensable shared sets of values and beliefs through which individuals live out their complex relations in a range of social networks. Ideologies are widely varied and intersect at all levels of all cultures, from religions to politics to choices in fashion. Our ideologies are diverse and ubiquitous; they inform our everyday lives in often subtle and barely noticeable forms. One could say that ideology is the means by which certain values—such as individual freedom, progress, and the importance of home—are made to seem like natural, inevitable aspects of everyday life. Ideology is manifested in widely shared social assumptions not only about the way things are but also about the way things should be. Images and media representations are some of the forms through which we engage or enlist others to share certain views or not, to hold certain values or not.

Practices of looking are intimately tied to ideology. The image culture in which we live is an arena of diverse and often conflicting ideologies. Images are elements of contemporary advertising and consumer culture through which assumptions about beauty, desire, glamour, and social value are both constructed and lived. Film and television are media through which we see reinforced certain familiar ideological constructions such as the value of romantic love, the norm of heterosexuality, nationalism, or traditional concepts of good and evil. The most important aspect of ideologies in the modernist period was that they appeared to be natural or given, rather than part of a system of belief that a culture produces in order to function in a particular way. Ideologies were thus, like Barthes's concept of myth, connotations that appear to be natural. As we move forward through the postmodern period, the idea that media representations naturalize ideologies becomes displaced by the idea that images are on par with and at play with naturalized ideologies. In an era of media saturation, images do not naturalize ideas as models of experience so much as they serve as parallel entities with experience.

Visual culture is thus not just a representation of ideologies and power relations but is integral to them. Ideologies are produced and affirmed through the social institutions that characterize a given society, such as the family, education, medicine, the law, the government, and the entertainment industry, among others. Ideologies permeate the world of entertainment. They also permeate the more mundane and everyday realms of life that we do not usually associate with the word *culture*: science, education, medicine, law. All are deeply informed by the ideologies of the particular social institutions as they intersect with ideologies of a given culture's

religious and cultural realms. Though we tend to think of images in association with culture and the arts, all of these everyday institutions and areas of life use images. Images are used, for example, for the categorization and classification of peoples for identification, as evidence of disease in medical screening and diagnosis, and as courtroom evidence. Shortly after photography was developed in Europe in the early nineteenth century, private citizens began hiring photographers to make individual and family portraits. Portraits often marked important moments such as births, marriages, and even deaths (the funerary portrait was a popular convention). One widespread early use of photography was to incorporate the image into a *carte de visite*, or visiting card. These small cards were used by many middle- and upper-class people in European-American societies as calling cards featuring photographic portraits of themselves. In addition, in the late nineteenth century there was a craze of purchasing *carte de visites* of well-known people, such as the British royal family. This practice signaled the role that photographic images would play in

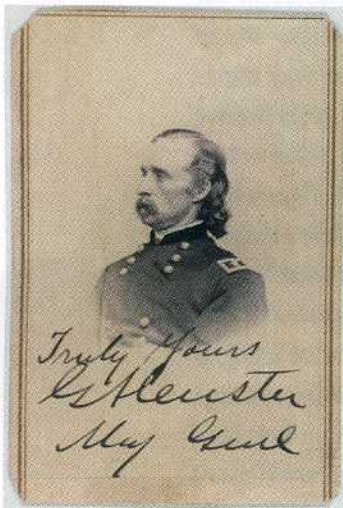


FIG. 1.10
Carte de visite of George
Armstrong Custer, 1860s

the construction of celebrity throughout the twentieth century. This *carte de visite* of U.S. General George Custer, which was taken in the 1860s, shows Custer's image and signature, with the salutation "Truly Yours." On the reverse side is the name of the photo studio. Thus in the *carte de visite*, the photographic portrait, sometimes accompanied by a signature, was a means to affirm individuality, and it demonstrated one of the ways that photography was integrated into bourgeois life and its values in the nineteenth century. Sekula writes that photography developed quickly into a medium that functioned both honorifically (for example, in the case of portraiture) and repressively (in the case of the use of photography for the cataloging of citizens, police photographs, and the use of photographs to discern qualities such as pathology or deviance in human subjects).⁹

Photographs were widely regarded from the beginning as tools of science and of public surveillance. Astronomers spoke of using photographic film to mark the movements of the stars. Photographs were used in hospitals, mental institutions, and prisons to record and study populations, in hopes that they could be classified and tracked over time. Indeed, in rapidly growing urban industrial centers, photographs quickly became an important way for police and public health officials to monitor urban populations perceived to be growing not only in numbers but also in rates of crime and social deviance.

What is the legacy of this use of images as a means of managing and controlling populations today? Portrait images, like fingerprints, are frequently used as personal identification—on passports, driver's licenses, credit cards, and identification cards in schools, in the welfare system, and in many other social institutions. Photographs are a primary medium of evidence in the criminal justice

system. We are accustomed to the fact that most stores, banks, and public places are outfitted with surveillance cameras. Our daily lives are tracked not only through our credit records but also through camera records of our movements. On a typical day of work, errands, and leisure, the activities of people in cities are recorded, often unbeknownst to them, by surveillance cameras. Often these images stay within the realm of identification and surveillance, where they go unnoticed by most of us, and are stored unviewed. But sometimes their venues change and they circulate in the public realm, where they acquire new meanings.

This happened in 1994, when the former football star O. J. Simpson was arrested as a suspect in a notorious murder case. Simpson's image had previously appeared only in sports media, advertising, and celebrity news media. He was rendered a different kind of public figure when his portrait, in the form of his police mug shot, was published on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines. The mug shot is a common use of photography in the criminal justice system. Information about all arrested people, whether they are convicted or not, is entered into the system in the form of personal data, fingerprints, photographs and sometimes even DNA samples. The conventions of the mug shot were presumably familiar to most people who saw the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. The conventions of framing and composition alone connote to viewers a sense of the subject's deviance and guilt, regardless of who is thus framed; the image format has the power to suggest the photographic subject's guilt. Simpson's mug shot seemed to be no different from any other in this regard.

Whereas *Newsweek* used the mug shot as it had been initially photographed, *Time* heightened the contrast and darkened Simpson's skin tone in its use of this image on the magazine's cover, reputedly for "aesthetic" reasons. Interestingly, *Time* magazine's publishers do not allow this cover to be reproduced (we reproduce the *Newsweek* version here). What ideological assumptions might be said to underlie these uses of the same image? Critics charged that *Time* was following the historical convention of using darker skin tones to connote evil and to imply guilt. For instance, in motion pictures made during the first half of the twentieth century, when black and Latino performers appeared, they were most often cast in the roles of villains. This convention tied into the lingering ideologies of nineteenth-century racial science, in which it was proposed that certain bodily forms and attributes,

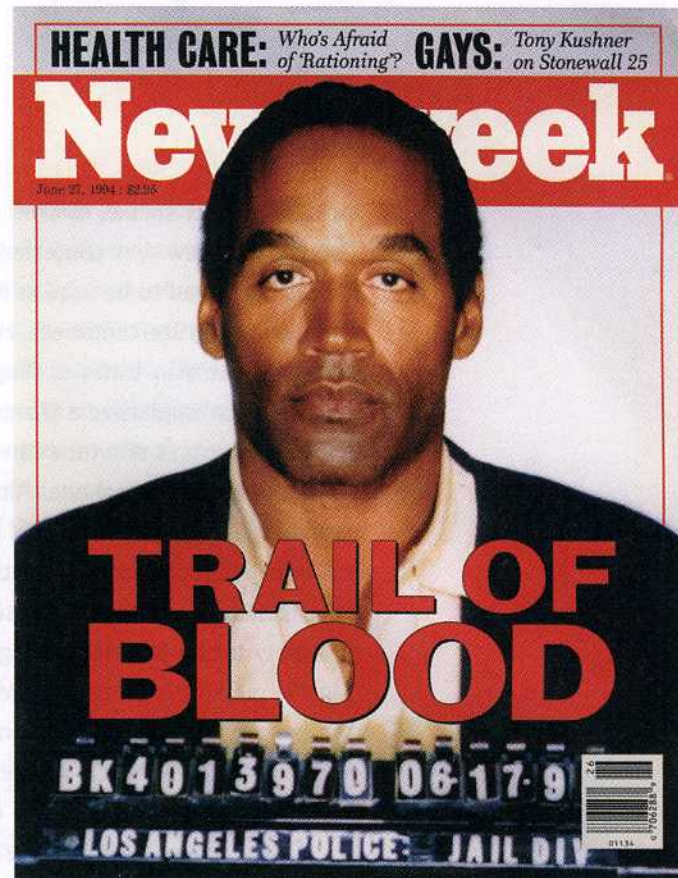


FIG. 1.11

Newsweek, June 27, 1994

including darker shades of skin, indicated a predisposition toward social deviance. Though this view was contested in the twentieth century, darker skin tones nonetheless continued to be used as literary, theatrical, and cinematic symbols of evil (as they have been for centuries). Hollywood studios even developed special makeup to darken the skin tones of Anglo, European, and light-skinned black and Latino performers to emphasize a character's evil nature. In this broader context, the darkening of Simpson's skin tone cannot be seen as a purely arbitrary or aesthetic choice but rather an ideological one. Although the magazine cover designers may not have intended to evoke this history of media representations, we live in a culture in which the association of dark tones with evil and the stereotype of black men as criminals still circulate. In addition, because of the codes of the mug shot, it could be said that by simply taking Simpson's image out of the context of the police file and placing it in the public eye, *Time* and *Newsweek* influenced the public to see Simpson as a criminal even before he had been placed on trial. In 1995, the announcement of the verdict in which Simpson was acquitted by a jury was reportedly watched by more than half of the U.S. population (he was later found liable in a civil trial).

As this example shows, the meaning of images can change dramatically when those images change social contexts. Today, the contexts in which images circulate have become infinitely more complex than they were even in the mid-twentieth century. Digital images taken on cell phones are e-mailed to websites, video shot by people of their daily lives is easily uploaded to Web media sites, Web cameras track people's lives and display them directly on websites, and photographs and videos of private moments can circulate rapidly on the Web and via e-mail, all then potentially seen by millions. This means that any given image or video clip might be displayed in a short period of time in many very different contexts, each of which might give it different inflections and meanings. It also means, to the dismay of many politicians and celebrities, that once images are set loose in these image distribution networks, they cannot be fully retrieved or regulated. The legal regulation of this circulation of images through copyright and fair use laws is an issue we consider in chapter 5.

How We Negotiate the Meaning of Images

We use many tools to interpret images and create meanings with them, and we often use these tools of looking automatically, without giving them much thought. Images are produced according to social and aesthetic conventions. Conventions are like road signs: we must learn their codes for them to make sense, and the codes we learn become second nature. Company logos operate according to this principle of instant recognition, counting on the fact that the denotative meaning (the swoosh equals Nike) will slide into connotative meanings (the swoosh means quality, coolness) that will boost sales. We decode images by interpreting clues pointing to intended, unintended, and even merely suggested meanings. These clues may be formal elements such as color, shades of black and white, tone, contrast, composition, depth,

perspective, and style of address to the viewer. As we saw in the case of the tonal rendering of O. J. Simpson's mug shot, seemingly neutral elements such as tone and color can take on cultural meanings. We also interpret images according to their socio-historical contexts. For example, we may consider when and where the image was made and displayed or the social context in which it is presented. Just as Simpson's mug shot took on new meanings when taken out of police records and reproduced on the cover of popular magazines, so an image appearing as a work of art in a museum takes on quite a different meaning when it is reproduced in an advertisement. We are trained to read for cultural codes such as aspects of the image that signify gendered, racial, or class-specific meanings.

Thus image codes change meaning in different contexts. For instance, the representation of smiles has meant many things throughout history. The *Mona Lisa*, for instance, is famous in part for her smile, which is understood to be enigmatic, hiding some kind of secret. The "smiley face" that emerged in the 1960s has largely been understood as a symbol of happiness. This symbol, which proliferated on buttons and T-shirts, also inspired the common emoticon practice of using punctuation in e-mail to signify a smile :-). Yet what a smile means depends on context. Is the little blond boy in *The First Murder* smiling or grimacing, and how does the context help us to determine the meaning of his expression? Chinese artist Yue Minjun creates paintings that evoke "symbolic smiles" and that make reference to the images and sculptures of laughing Buddha and comment with irony on the smile as a mask.

The smiles in Minjun's paintings seem to rise from anxiety, stretched across faces in painful caricature, connoting the irony, folly, and artificial sincerity of everyday life. We can infer these connotations from his painting titled *BUTTERFLY* (fig. 1.13), with its exaggeration of the smiles, the distorted faces, the horned heads, the strange and naked red bodies, here juxtaposed with colorful butterflies. Yet we can also learn more about those connotations by finding out about the artist, whose work is considered to be part of a Chinese art movement of cynical realism, and references to both modern and traditional China and the legacy of the laughing Buddha. Whereas the Buddha is laughing in contentment, Minjun's figures seem to be smiling in agony. These are very different smiles from the smiley face or the smile of the *Mona Lisa*.

Our discussion of the differing meaning of smiles draws from the concepts of semiotics. Every time we interpret an image around us (to understand what it signifies), whether consciously or not, we are using the tools of semiotics to understand its signification, or meaning. The principles of semiotics were formulated by the American logician, scientist, and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce in the late nineteenth century and the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in the early twentieth century. Both proposed important linguistic theories that were adapted in the middle of the twentieth century for use in image analysis. Saussure's writing, however, has had the



FIG. 1.12
Smiley face

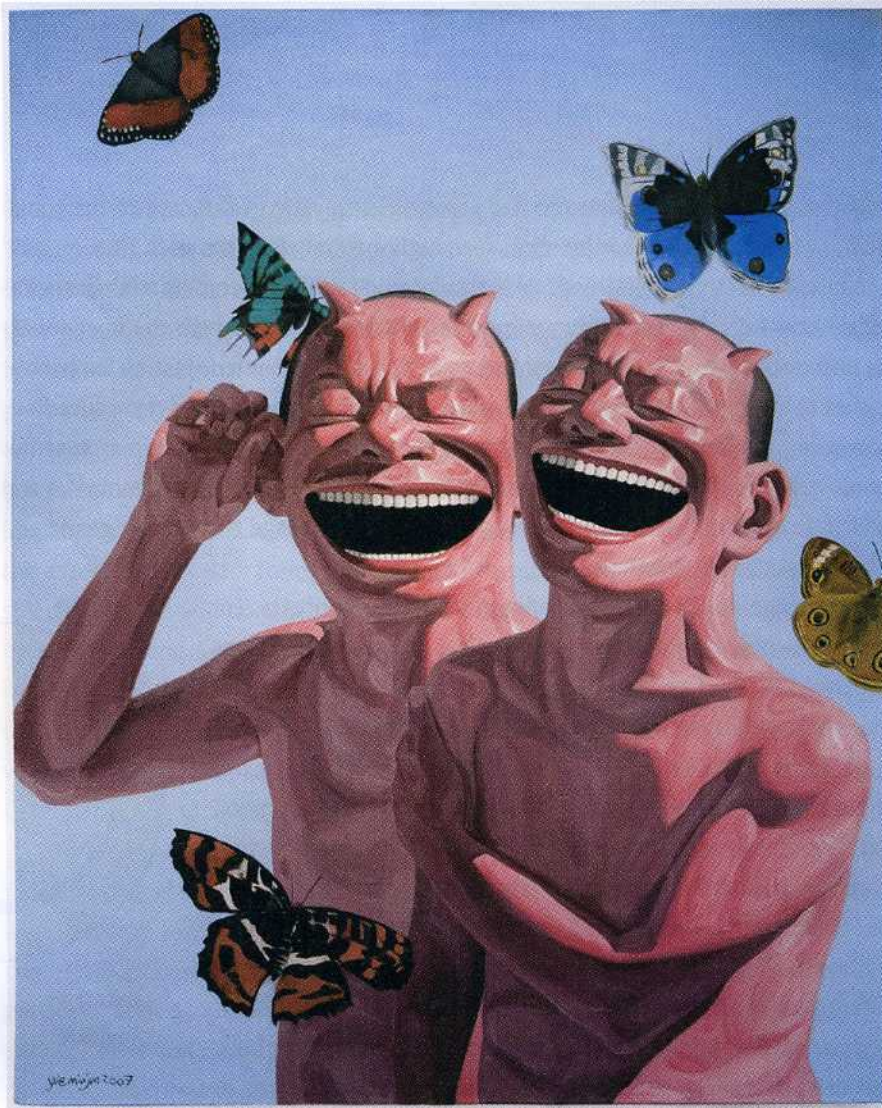


FIG. 1.13

Yue Minjun, *BUTTERFLY*, 2007

most influence on the theories of structuralism that inform the ways of analyzing visual culture discussed in this book. Language, according to Saussure, is like a game of chess. It depends on conventions and codes for its meanings. At the same time, Saussure argued, the relationship between a word (or the sound of that word when spoken) and things in the world is arbitrary and relative, not fixed. For example, the words *dog* in English, *chien* in French, and *hund* in German all refer to the same kind of animal; hence the relationship between the words and the animal itself is dictated by the conventions of language rather than by some natural connection. It was central to Saussure's theory that meanings change according to context and to the rules of language.

Charles Sanders Peirce (whose name is pronounced "purse") introduced the idea of a science of signs shortly before Saussure. Peirce believed that language and thought are processes of sign interpretation. For Peirce, meaning resides not in the initial perception of a sign or representation of an object but in the interpretation of the perception and subsequent action based on that perception. Every thought is a sign without meaning until a subsequent thought (what he called an interpretant) allows for its interpretation. For example, we perceive an octagonal red sign with the letters *STOP* inscribed. The meaning lies in the interpretation of the sign and subsequent action (we stop).

Saussure's ideas about language were adapted by theorists, from Barthes to film theorists, for use in the interpretation of visual representational systems. Peirce's concepts have been used for visual analysis as well. In applying semiotics to film, theorists emphasized that film involves a set of rules or codes that function in some ways like a language. There have been many revisions of the application of semiotics to images, but it nonetheless remains an important method of visual analysis. We choose to concentrate in this book on the model of semiotics introduced by Barthes (as we discussed earlier) and based on Saussure, because this system offers a clear and direct way to understand the relationship between visual representations and meaning.

In Barthes's model, in addition to the two levels of meaning of denotation and connotation, there is the sign, which is composed of the signifier—a sound, written word, or image—and the signified, which is the concept evoked by that word or image. In the familiar smiley face icon, the smile is the signifier, and happiness is the signified. In the Minjun painting reproduced here, the smile is the signifier, and anxiety is the signified. The image (or word) and its meaning together (the signifier and signified together) form the *sign*.

Image/sound/word = Signifier
Meaning = Signified

For Saussure, *signifier* is the entity that represents, and *sign* is the combination of the signifier and what it means. As we have seen with these two different images of smiles, an image or word can have many meanings and constitute many signs in Saussure's use of that term. The production of a sign is dependent on social, historical, and cultural context. It is also dependent on the context in which the image is presented (in a museum gallery or a magazine, for instance) and on the viewers who interpret it. We live in a world of signs, and it is the labor of our interpretation that makes the signifier-signified relationship fluid and active in the production of signs and meaning.

Often the meaning of an image is predominantly derived from the objects within the frame. For instance, old Marlboro advertisements are well known for their equation of this cigarette brand with masculinity: Marlboro (signifier) + masculinity (signified) = Marlboro as masculinity (sign). The cowboy is featured on horseback or just relaxing with a smoke, surrounded by natural beauty evocative of the unspoiled American West. These advertisements connote rugged individualism and life on the American frontier, when men were "real" men. The Marlboro Man embodies a romantic ideal of freedom that stands in contrast to the more confined lives of most everyday working people. It is testimony to the power of these ads to create the sign of Marlboro as masculinity (and the Marlboro Man as connoting a lost ideal of masculinity) that many contemporary Marlboro ads dispense with the cowboy altogether and simply show the landscape, in which this man exists by implication. This ad campaign also testifies to the ways in which objects can become gendered through advertising. It is a little-known fact that Marlboro was marketed as a "feminine" cigarette (with lipstick-red-tipped filters) until the 1950s, when the Marlboro Man made

his first appearance. Indeed, the Marlboro Man has long been appropriated as a camp icon in gay male culture. In 1999, the well-known huge Marlboro Man billboard on Sunset Strip in Hollywood was taken down and replaced by an antismoking billboard that mocked this icon of buff masculinity. The Marlboro Man has been invoked in many antismoking ads to create new signs for smoking, such as Marlboro Man = loss of virility or smoking = disease, as this antismoking ad does.

Our understanding of the Marlboro ad and its spoof is dependent on our knowledge that cowboys are disappearing from the American landscape, that they are cultural symbols of a particular ideology of American expansionism and the frontier that began to fade with urban industrialization and modernization. We bring to these images cultural knowledge of the changing role of men and the recognition that it indicates a fading stereotype of masculine virility. Clearly, our interpretation of images often depends on historical context and the viewers' cultural knowledge—the conventions the images use or play off of, the other images they refer to, and the familiar figures and symbols they include. As conventions, signs can be a kind of shorthand language for viewers of images, and we are often incited to feel that the relationship between a signifier and signified is “natural.” For instance, we are so accustomed to identifying a rose with the concept of romantic love and a dove with peace that it is difficult to recognize that their relationship is constructed rather than natural. We can see how Barthes's model can be useful in examining how images construct meanings. Moreover, the very fact that the sign is divided into a signifier and a signified allows us to see that a variety of images can convey many different meanings.

Peirce worked with a somewhat different model in which the sign (which for him is the word or image, not the relationship between word or image and object) is distinguished not only from the interpreted meaning (the interpretant) but also from the object itself. Peirce's

FIG. 1.14
Anti-smoking ad



THE VEIL

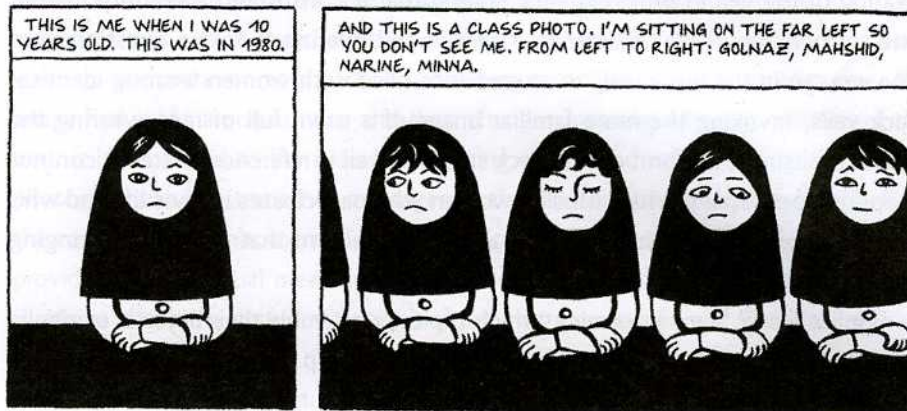


FIG. 1.15

Marjane Satrapi, frames from *Persepolis*, 2003

work has been important for looking at images because of the distinctions that he makes between different kinds of signs and their relationship to the real. Peirce described three kinds of signs or representations: iconic, indexical, and symbolic. In Peirce's definition, iconic signs resemble their object in some way. Many paintings and drawings are iconic, as are many comics, photographs, and film and television images.

We can see iconic signs at work in Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel, *Persepolis*, which was the basis for a 2007 animated film. *Persepolis* is the story of Satrapi's growing up in Iran during the time of the Iranian Revolution. Her personal life is caught up in the violent changes in Iranian society. In this image, she depicts herself as a young girl who with her classmates has been obliged to wear a veil to school. The simplicity of Satrapi's style creates iconic signs of the young women and their veils—we know how to read these images, in Peirce's terms, because they resemble what they are representing. In stark black and white, the veils command visual attention within the frame. Satrapi uses visual repetition and framing to depict the homogenizing visual effect of the girls' veils, as well as to mark herself as an individual (in a separate frame). These strategies of framing, motif, and the flattening of space (here, the girls are situated against a blank background) are used to depict character and psychological states of mind. The girls' hands are all folded in unison, making clear how they must conform in the school environment (and by implication in the society). Yet their facial expressions establish from this first page that they are all responding in different ways (annoyance, dejection, compliance) to the demand that they wear the veil and conform.

The cultural meaning of the veil is highly complex. Its depiction as an artifact of oppression, as we see here in Satrapi's image, has been countered by a politics of appropriating the veil as a means of affirming one's Muslim identity in the Islamic diaspora. For instance, the Spirit21 blog (www.spirit21.co.uk) presented, in 2007, a series of cartoons that comment on the politics of the veil in Britain, where

former Prime Minister Tony Blair and his wife Cherie had spoken out against the wearing of the veil in British streets, stating that it constituted a security matter. One cartoon shows Blair delivering a speech and offering to take a question from “the woman in the black veil” in an audience filled with women wearing identical black veils, invoking the more familiar image of a room full of men wearing the standard business uniform of the black suit. The veil is referenced here as icon not of oppression but of the new Muslim woman who participates in civic life and who publicly signifies her cultural identity through a uniform that connotes belonging and respect.

Unlike iconic signs in comics, which typically resemble their objects, symbolic signs, according to Peirce, bear no obvious relationship to their objects. Symbols are created through an arbitrary (one could say “unnatural”) alliance of a particular object and a particular meaning. For example, languages are symbolic systems that use conventions to establish meaning. There is no natural link between the word *cat* and an actual cat; the convention in the English language gives the word its signification. Symbolic signs are inevitably more restricted in their capacity to convey

meaning in that they refer to learned systems. Someone who does not speak English can probably recognize an image of a cat (an iconic sign), whereas the word *cat* (a symbolic sign) will have no obvious meaning.

It is Peirce’s discussion of images as indexical that is most useful in visual culture study. Indexical signs as discussed by Peirce involve an “existential” relationship between the sign and the interpretant. This means that they have coexisted in the same place at some time. Peirce uses as examples the symptom of a disease, a pointing hand, and a weathervane. Fingerprints are indexical signs of a person, and photographs are also indexical signs that testify to the moment that the camera was in the presence of its subject. Indeed, although photographs are both iconic and indexical, their cultural meaning is derived in large part from their indexical meaning as a trace of the real.

The creation of signs semiotically is usually the result of a combination of factors in an image,

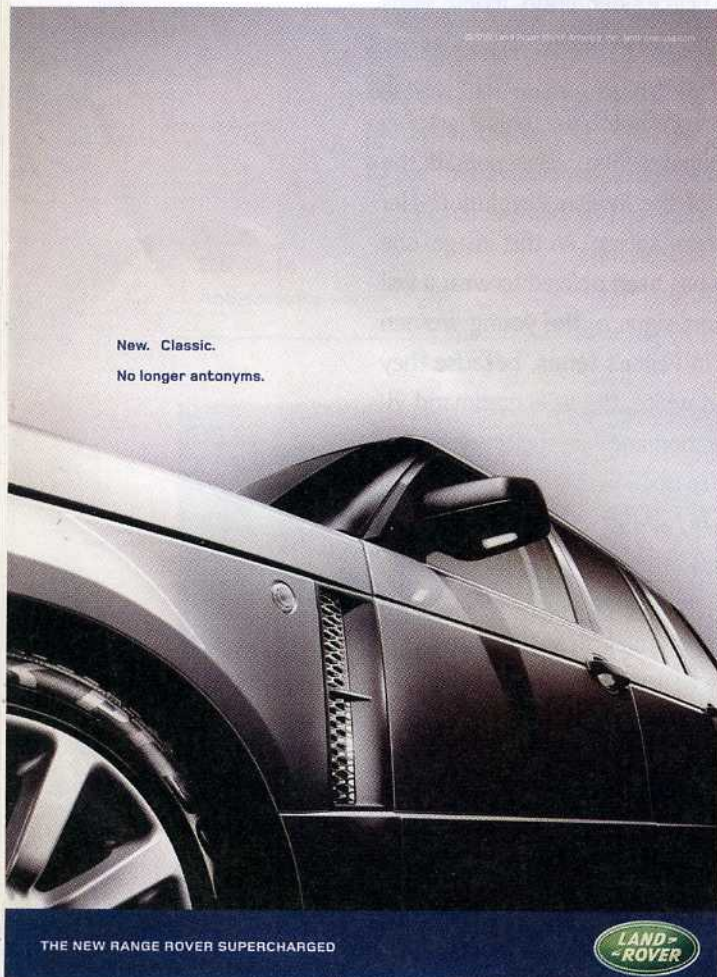


FIG. 1.16
Land Rover ad, 2007

and this means that meaning is often derived through the combination of text and image. This is particularly the case in advertising, public service advertising, and political posters, in which the combination of text and image can be used to direct the viewer's interpretation to a particular meaning through a kind of double take—the image first looks a certain way and then changes meaning with the addition of the text. It is important to the indexical meaning of most advertisements that they use photographs to construct their messages. In that photographs always carry with them the connotation of photographic truth yet are also a primary source of fantasy, they provide important dual meanings in many advertisements. However, text functions in ads to shape the commodity signs of the image, to rein in and limit the meaning of the image in some way. This Land Rover ad (fig. 1.16) uses text, which suggests that the car can be new as well as classic, to shape how viewer-consumers will see the image of the car itself. Other slogans could have guided the meaning of the image in other ways to consider the tank-like aspect of the car or its massive size. A parody of the ad could use text to play off this aspect of the car, pointing to the company's role as a military vehicle supplier. Contemporary advertising, with its complex combinations of words, photographs, drawing, sound, and television images, deploys all three kinds of signs designated by Peirce to construct selling messages, including not only indexical photographs and symbolic text but also iconic signs in the forms of drawings and graphs. It is important to keep in mind that Peirce's system allows us to see the cultural weight that is given to photographs—as indexical signs, as traces of the real, photographs are awarded a particular sense of authenticity in relation to other signs.

FIG. 1.17
Vincent van Gogh, *Iris*, 1889



The Value of Images

The work of detecting social, cultural, and historical meanings in images often happens without our being aware of the process and is part of the pleasure of looking at images. Some of the information we bring to reading images has to do with what we perceive their value to be in a culture at large. This raises the question: What gives an image social value? Images do not have value in and of themselves; they are awarded different kinds of value—monetary, social, and political—in particular social contexts.

In the art market, the value of a work of art is determined by economic and cultural factors, including collecting by art institutions such as museums and by private collectors. This painting of irises by Vincent van Gogh (fig. 1.17) achieved a new level of fame in 1991 when it was sold for an unprecedented price of \$53.8 million to the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Other paintings have since sold for even more extraordinary amounts. In 2006, the private sale of the American abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock's 1948 painting titled *No. 5* brought its seller \$140 million. In each case, the painting in itself does not inherently contain or reveal its monetary value; rather, this is information we bring to an interpretation of it through such factors as changes in the art market and contemporary taste with regard to the style of a past period. Why was the Pollock worth so much money in 2006? Why was the van Gogh worth so much in 1991? Beliefs about a work's authenticity and uniqueness, as well as about its aesthetic style, contribute to its value. The social mythology that surrounds a work of art or its artist can also contribute to its value. Van Gogh's *Irises* is considered authentic because it has been proven that it is an original work by van Gogh, not a copy, though the market for his work has been fraught with counterfeits. Van Gogh's work is valued because it is believed to be among the best examples of the innovative modern painting style of impressionism, which was adapted by van Gogh in a more expressionist approach during the late nineteenth century. The myths that surround van Gogh's life and work also contribute to the value of his works. Most of us know that van Gogh was often unhappy and mentally unstable, that he cut off his ear, and that he committed suicide. We may know more about his life than we know about the technical and aesthetic judgments made by art historians about his work. We may also be aware that Pollock drank and died at age forty-four in a tragic crash while driving under the influence and that he painted his most famous works by walking around huge canvases, dripping paint from a can and brush in gestures that resulted in abstract, nonfigurative globs and lines. Although some of it is extraneous to the artwork itself, this biographical information contributes to the work's value—partly insofar as it plays into the stereotype or myth of the creative artist as a sensitive figure whose artistic talent is not taught but rather is a "natural" form of creativity that can border on madness and is released in the graphic form of the painting.

The van Gogh gains its economic value in part through cultural determinations concerning what society judges to be important in assessing works of art. It is regarded as authentic because it bears the artist's signature and has been verified by art historians who pay close attention to authentication of the work of this artist because he was posthumously subject to a major case of forgery. The press surrounding the forgeries and their discovery heightened the reputation of the artist and made his works even more valuable. The artist has international fame and notoriety that go beyond the work itself to include not only his personality and life history but also the life of his works as they are bought, sold, copied illicitly, and legally reproduced in books and videos. Finally, van Gogh's technique is regarded as unique and superior among other works of the period. Part of our recognition of its value has to do simply with its stature within institutions such as museums, art history classes, and art auctions. One way that value is communicated is through the mechanisms of art display.

We sometimes know a work of art is important because it is encased in a gilded frame. This convention has become something of a joke, with everything from low brow art (a contemporary genre of painting that appropriates the aesthetics of 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s popular iconography) to advertising appropriating the gilded frame as an ironic reference to the object in the frame as (anything but) high culture. We might assume that a work of art is valuable simply because it is on display in a prestigious museum or is displayed in a special way, as is the case with the *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da

FIG. 1.18

Mona Lisa on display in the Louvre



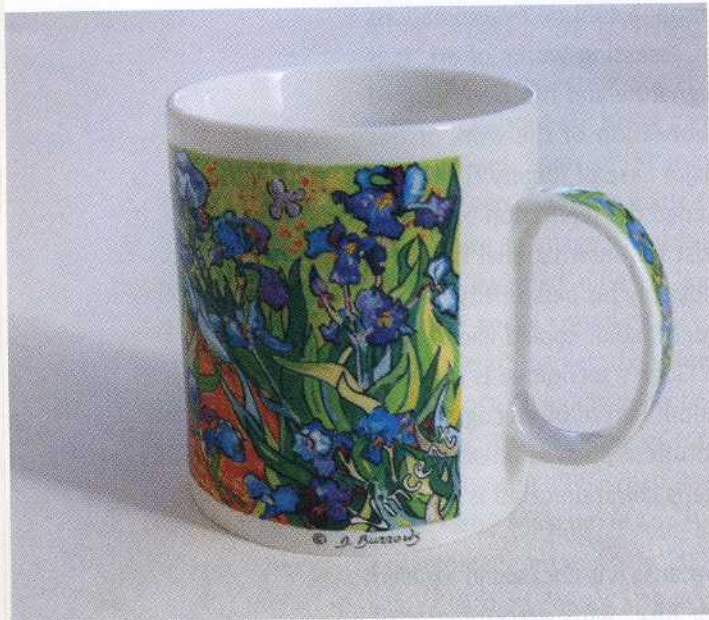


FIG. 1.19

Van Gogh's *Iris*es on a coffee mug

Vinci, which is displayed in a climate-controlled room behind bulletproof glass to protect it from any potential vandals among the six million or so people who view it annually (vandals had doused the painting with acid and thrown a rock at it in 1956). Although the fine art object may be valued because it is unique, it may be valued also because it can be highly marketable as an item reproduced for popular consumption. For example, van Gogh's paintings have been reproduced endlessly on posters, postcards, coffee mugs and T-shirts. Ordinary

consumers can own a copy of the highly valued originals. We discuss this aspect of image reproduction further in chapter 5.

As images are increasingly easy to generate and reproduce electronically, the values traditionally attributed to them have changed. In any given culture, we use different criteria to evaluate various media forms. Whereas we evaluate paintings according to the criteria of uniqueness, authenticity, and market values, we may award value to television news images, for instance, on the basis of their capacity to provide information and accessibility to important events. The value of a television news image lies in its capacity to be transmitted quickly and widely to a vast number of geographically dispersed television screens and that of the digital news image lies in it being instantly distributable to newspapers and websites.

Image Icons

This image of the lone student at Tiananmen Square has value as an icon of world-wide struggles for democracy precisely because of the meaning of this historical event and because many students lost their lives in the protests. Here, we use the term *icon* in a general sense, rather than in the specific sense used by Peirce that we discussed earlier. An icon is an image that refers to something outside of its individual components, something (or someone) that has great symbolic meaning for many people. Icons are often perceived to represent universal concepts, emotions, and meanings. Thus an image produced in a specific culture, time, and place might be interpreted as having broader meaning and the capacity to evoke similar responses across all cultures and in all viewers.

The television news image of the student protest at Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989 can be said to be a valuable image, although the criteria for its value have



FIG. 1.20

Tiananmen Square, Beijing, China, 1989

nothing to do with the art market or the monetary value of any particular print of this photograph. The value of this image is based in part on its capturing of a special moment (it depicts a key moment in an event during which media coverage was restricted) and the speed with which it was transmitted around the world to provide information about that event (at a historical moment when the Web did not yet exist as a forum for image circulation). Its value is also derived from its powerful depiction of the courage of one student before the machinery of military power. This photograph achieved worldwide recognition, becoming an *icon* of political struggles for freedom of expression. Whereas its denotative meaning is simply a young man standing before a tank, its connotative and iconic meaning is commonly understood to be the importance of individual actions in the face of injustice and the capacity of one individual to stand up to forces of power. This image thus has value not as

FIG. 1.21

Photograph of protestors at April 9, 2008 San Francisco protest against decision to hold Summer Olympics in Beijing





FIG. 1.22
Raphael, *The Small Cowper
Madonna*, c. 1505

a singular image (once broadcast, it was not one image but millions of images on many different TV sets and newspapers, though it was censored in China) but through its speed of transmission, its informative value, and its political statement. We can say that it is culturally valuable because it makes a statement about human will and the potential of resistance, and as such it has become an icon. It is not incidental that the image achieves this iconic status through the depiction not of the many thousands of protestors at Tiananmen Square but through the image of one lone individual. As Robert Hariman and John Lucaites explain in *No Caption Needed*, the iconicity of the image derives in part from its simplicity, from the fact that the events seems to take place in a deserted public space (there is actually a crowd outside the frame) and that the image is viewed from a modernist perspective that affords a distance to the viewer.¹⁰ They argue that the image of the lone individual potentially limits the political imagination within a liberal framework of individualism. The iconic status of the Tiananmen Square image has resulted in a broad array of remakes of the image.



FIG. 1.23

Joos van Cleve, *Virgin and Child*,
c. 1525

The simplicity of the image of the protestor confronting tanks emerged in the protests against the oppression of Tibet in the months before the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, in which a simple pictograph (in Peirce's terms, an iconic sign) of a tank and a civilian invokes the famous photograph of Tiananmen Square. Here, the protestors have effectively combined the iconic sign of the Olympic rings with the iconic sign of the tank and student to put their protest in historical context.

Image icons are experienced as if universal, but their meanings are always historically and contextually produced. Consider the example of the image of mother and child that is so ubiquitous in Western art. The iconography of the mother and child is widely believed to represent universal concepts of maternal emotion, the essential bond between a mother and her offspring, and the importance of motherhood throughout the world and human history. The sheer number of paintings with this theme throughout the history of art attests not simply to the centrality of the Madonna figure in Christianity but also to the idea that the bond between mother and

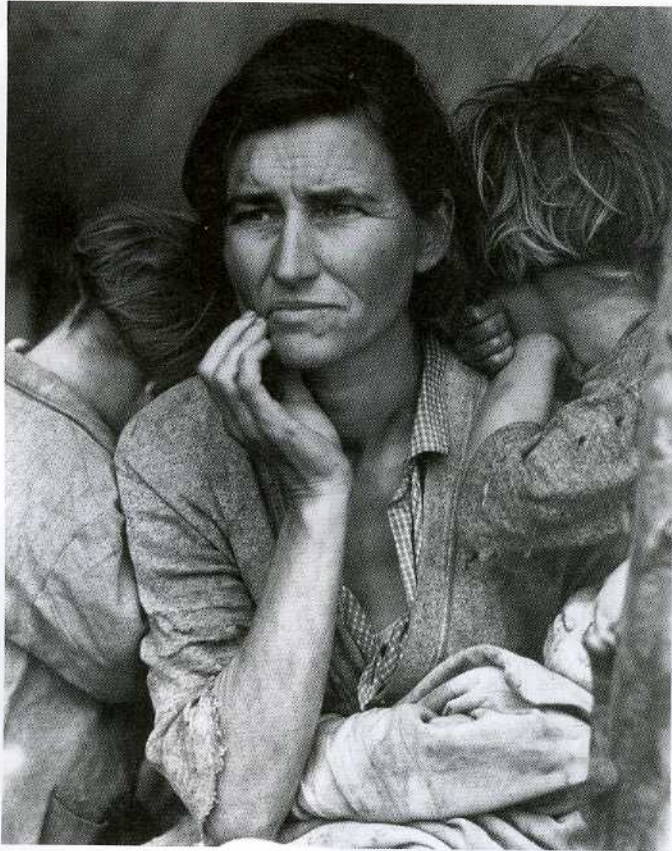


FIG. 1.24

Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, California, 1936

child represented in images like these is universal and natural, not culturally and historically specific and socially constructed.

To question the assumptions underpinning this concept of the universal would mean to look at the cultural, historical, and social meanings that are specific in these images. There is an increased understanding that these concepts of the universal were actually restricted to specific privileged groups. Icons do not represent individuals, nor do they represent universal

values. Thus the mother and child motif present in these two paintings by Italian painter Raphael and Dutch painter Joos van Cleve can be read not as evidence of universal ideals of motherhood but as an indicator of specific cultural values of motherhood and the role of women in Western culture in the sixteenth century, particularly in Europe. In both paintings, there are particular image codes at work—both infants are depicted as naked with adult-like faces, and the woman's maternal figures are shapely in the conventions of sixteenth-century Europe. Whereas the Madonna of Raphael's painting looks out of the frame in an almost detached way, the van Cleve Madonna is nursing and reading, surrounded by an array of symbolic objects. Furthermore, these images situate these figures within particular cultural landscapes, Raphael's Madonna before an Italian landscape and van Cleve's before an elaborate Dutch vista. The closer we look at these two images, the more culturally and historically specific they appear.

It is in relationship to this tradition of Madonna and child paintings that more recent images of women and children gain meaning. For instance, this famous photograph, *Migrant Mother*, by Dorothea Lange depicts a woman, also apparently a mother, during the California migration of the 1930s. This photograph is regarded as an iconic image of the Great Depression in the United States. It is famous because it evokes both the despair and the perseverance of those who survived the hardships of that time. Yet the image gains much of its meaning from its implicit reference to the history of artistic depictions of women and their children, such as Madonna and child images, and its difference from them. This mother is anxious and distracted. Her children cling to her and burden her thin frame. She looks not at her children but outward as if toward her future—one seemingly with little promise. This image derives its meaning largely from a viewer's knowledge of the historical moment it

represents. At the same time, it makes a statement about the complex role of motherhood that is informed by its place in the iconic tradition.

This photograph has historically specific meanings, yet in many ways its function as an icon allows it to have meanings that go beyond that historical moment. Lange took the image while working on a government documentation project funded by the Farm Security Administration. With other photographers, she produced an extraordinary archive of photographs of the Great Depression in the United States in the 1930s. Lange was one of a small number of women photographers who worked on the project, and the story of her taking of this image is legendary in the history of photography. She took five pictures of this woman and her children. The one reproduced here shows the family's surrounding context the least. Years later, researchers tracked down the woman depicted in the image, who was still living in relative poverty in California, not having benefited in the least from the wide dissemination of her image as an icon. It is the close framing of this image that allows it to emerge as not just an image of one mother with her children but as an icon of maternal devotion and perseverance.¹¹

People themselves can be image icons. For example, Marilyn Monroe was a pop icon of the 1950s and 1960s, a star who was regarded as the embodiment of female glamour. Her wavy blond hair, open smile, and full figure were stereotypical components of an American

FIG. 1.25

Andy Warhol, *Marilyn Diptych*, 1962





FIG. 1.26
Benetton ad, 1990s

beauty ideal. What counts as glamorous or sexy changes over time and across cultures, as Burson's beauty composites, which we discussed earlier, suggest. The preference for full-figured women was replaced in the late twentieth century by an idealization of the thin, athletic body. Pop artist Andy Warhol, who made works about postwar consumer culture, mass manufacture, and commercial reproduction, worked with an iconic photograph of Marilyn Monroe that was familiar to virtually the entire nation. He printed multiple versions of this same image in a colorful grid. This print, *Marilyn Diptych* (fig. 1.25), comments not only on the star's iconic status as a glamorous figure but also on the role of the star as media commodity—as a product of the entertainment industry. Marilyn the icon can be infinitely reproduced for mass consumption, thanks to the technologies of photography and commercial printing. Warhol's work emphasizes one of the most important aspects of contemporary imaging technologies: they offer us the capacity to reproduce images many times and in different contexts, thereby changing their meaning and altering their value—and that of the objects or people they represent—as commodities. In this work, the multiple images of Monroe emphasize that cultural icons can and must be mass distributed in order for the star herself to have mass appeal. These copies do not refer back to the original so much as they indicate the endless reproducibility of Monroe as a product to be consumed in many forms.

To call an image an icon raises the question of context. For whom is this image iconic and for whom is it not? These images of motherhood and of glamour are specific to particular cultures at particular moments in time. One could regard them as indicators of the cultural values attributed to women throughout history and the restrictive roles to which women have been relegated (mother or sex symbol, virgin or vamp). Images have divergent meanings in different cultural and historical contexts. When, for instance, Benetton produced this advertisement in the 1990s

of a black woman nursing a white child, a range of interpretations were possible. This advertisement was published throughout Europe, but magazines in the United States refused to run it. The image can be understood in the history of images of mother and child, although its meaning is contingent on the viewer's assumption, on the basis of the contrast of their skin color, that this woman is not the child's biological mother but its caretaker. In the United States this image carried the troubling connotation of the history of slavery and the use of black women slaves as wet nurses to breast-feed the white children of slave owners. Thus the intended meaning of this image as an icon of an idealized interracial mother-child relationship is not easily conveyed in a context in which the image's meanings are overdetermined by historical factors. Similarly, the classical art history image of Madonna and child may not serve as an icon for motherhood in non-Christian cultures but rather as an example of specifically Western and particularly Christian beliefs.

Pop star Madonna gained notoriety by combining and playing off of one another the religious iconography of the Madonna and the sexual iconography of Marilyn Monroe. Madonna borrowed and reworked the elements of both these cultural icons. At various points in her career, Madonna assumed Monroe's blonde hair color and 1940s clothing styles. In this image, we can see the 1990 incarnation of Madonna's Marilyn appropriation, here on her Blonde Ambition Tour, wearing a signature blonde wig and campy corset. Through these acts of cultural appropriation, Madonna acquired the power of these icons (of Madonna and Marilyn) while reflecting ironically on their meaning in the popular culture of the 1980s and 1990s.

In 2003, the San Francisco painter Isabel Samaras took the mother and child iconography into the realm of nonhuman species. In *Behold My Heart*, Samaras depicts a scene from the 1971 film *Escape from the Planet of the Apes*, in which Zira, the talking chimpanzee scientist who studied (and lobotomized, neutered, and spayed) humans in the 1968 film *Planet of the Apes*, cradles lovingly to her breast the child she will be forced to abandon after she is stigmatized and ostracized on the discovery of her experiments, sacrificing her own life for his survival. As in the 1525



FIG. 1.27
Madonna on Blonde Ambition
Tour, London,
England, 1990



FIG. 1.28

Isabel Samaras, *Behold My Heart*,
2003

Virgin and Child (fig. 1.23), a book sits open before the pair, and a backdrop of landscaped foliage reminiscent of backdrops in a Renaissance painting extends behind the curtain backdrop that frames them. Caesar, the baby monkey—who will grow up to become a revolutionary hero in later films of the series and is credited as being the first ape to say no to a human—fingers hieroglyphic-like markings on a leather plate strapped to his mother's cloaked bosom. The film series, widely regarded as a campy parable of racial oppression and resistance, is here invoked as a pop surrealist expression of the iconography of maternal relations. Here, the politics of species is a displaced site for articulating a critique of the politics of race in an age dominated by a revival of biological ways of understanding culture.



FIG. 1.29

Daniel Edwards, *Monument to Pro-Life: The Birth of Sean Preston*, 2006

Although parody and irony have appeared to be dominant modes of image production and interpretation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, they are not the only modes invoked in popular culture. Take the example of Britney Spears, yet another female performer who achieved the status of cultural icon at a young age. Spears is the eighth best-selling musical artist in American musical history. Having established herself as one of the most successful American female pop vocalists by the age of twenty in 2000, she put aside her career in 2005 to give birth to the first of her children, announcing that she would dedicate herself to her role as mother. In 2005, a New York gallery unveiled a sculpture by Daniel Edwards titled *Monument to Pro-Life*. It depicts Spears nude, her body splayed on a bearskin rug, belly pushed down and hips thrust upward to reveal the crowning skull of a child emerging from her pelvis. This image of the female pop star turned mother was directly reminiscent of the role that Madonna took on as a young pop star in the 1980s and 1990s. However, whereas Madonna's use of the referent of the virgin mother was highly ironic, parodic, and rife with appropriations of beauty codes and standards of bygone years, Britney's performance of motherhood (and Edwards' depiction of it) seemed to be without any intended irony. Both her decision to change roles and the appropriation of her by the pro-life movement seemed to be in earnest. The irony emerged later when, in 2007, Spears lost custody of her children in a trial that was closely paralleled by media stories revealing her heavy partying, drug use, and psychiatric treatment, and when, in 2008, her 16-year-old sister Jamie

Lynn Spears, star of Nickelodeon's *Zoey 101*, shocked millions of young fans by ending the season with a real-life pregnancy, then embracing life as a teen mom in rural Mississippi. The meanings of Britney Spears as a maternal figure change, then, with changing events that bring new connotations to older images. Although Britney's media coverage has characterized her life as fraught with ironies, Britney herself did not use irony as a political and creative tool, as did her predecessor, Madonna.

Britney images offered yet another level of meaning when fan Chris Crocker, an infamous figure on YouTube, appeared in an emotionally charged two-minute video self-production, demanding of his very large viewing audience (he has received upwards of ten million hits), with tears in his eyes, "how f***** dare anyone out there make fun of Britney after all she's been through?" Crocker, an established young gay YouTuber from Eastern Tennessee, lambasted the media for shamelessly making money from Britney's difficult life circumstances. Rather than critiquing Britney and everything she personifies, as an earlier generation of media-savvy youth might have done, Crocker attempted to protect her right to a public existence free of judgment and criticism. Does Crocker's response suggest that we have entered into a postcritical era of visual culture? It is interesting, as a postscript, to note that Crocker's career received a big boost with this defense of his idol, with invitations to appear on talk shows and even a well-known star of television and film (*Family Guy*'s Seth Green) posting his own YouTube send-up of the Crocker performance, replete with mascara and tears.

To chart this representation of mother and child from sixteenth-century painting to the performance of the Madonna by a pop star to the widely viewed homemade video of a fan posted on a website demonstrates many aspects of the complexity of contemporary visual culture and the codes and signs through which cultural meaning is produced. These codes build on one another, incorporating these historical legacies of image codes at the same time that they rework, play off, and recode them.

To interpret images is to examine the assumptions that we and others bring to them at different times and in different places and to decode the visual language that they "speak." All images contain layers of meaning that include their formal aspects, their cultural and sociohistorical references, the ways they make reference to the images that precede and surround them, and the contexts in which they are displayed. Reading and interpreting images is one way that we, as viewers, contribute to the process of assigning value to the culture in which we live. Practices of looking, then, are not passive acts of consumption. By looking at and engaging with images in the world, we influence the meanings and uses assigned to the images that fill our day-to-day lives. In the next chapter, we examine the many ways that viewers create meaning when they engage in looking.

Notes

1. Weegee [Arthur Fellig], *Naked City* (Cambridge, Mass: Da Capo, [1945] 2002).
2. See Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, with illustrations and letters by René Magritte, trans. and ed. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
3. Talan Memmott, "RE: Authoring Magritte: *The Brotherhood of Bent Billiards*," in *Second Person: Role Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, 157–58 (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).
4. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, 85 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).
5. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 14–15.
6. Allan Sekula, "On The Invention of Photographic Meaning," in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin, 94 (London: Macmillan, 1982).
7. Robert Frank, *The Americans* (Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, [1959] 1978).
8. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," from *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, 34 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
9. Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986), 6–7.
10. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), chapter 7. See also their website, www.nocaptionneeded.com.
11. For an extensive overview of interpretations of the "Migrant Mother" image, see Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 49–67; and Liz Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, 3rd ed., 37–48 (New York: Routledge, [1996] 2004).

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