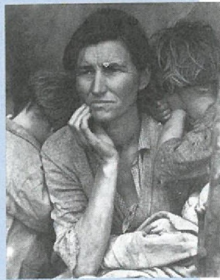
Sturken, Marita, and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.

chapter **one**



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 visuality 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 Felig), *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.

FIG. 1.2
Weegee working in the trunk of his Chevrolet, 1942

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. 1.3
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,

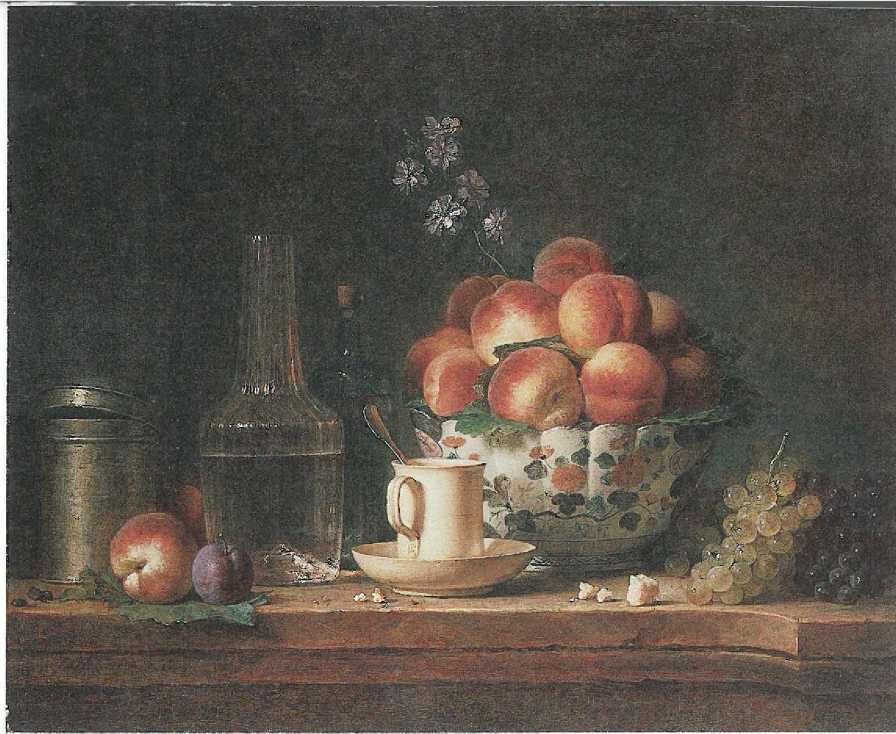


FIG. 1.4
Henri-Horace Roland de la Porte, *Still Life*, c. 1765

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 seventeen-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

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

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.

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,

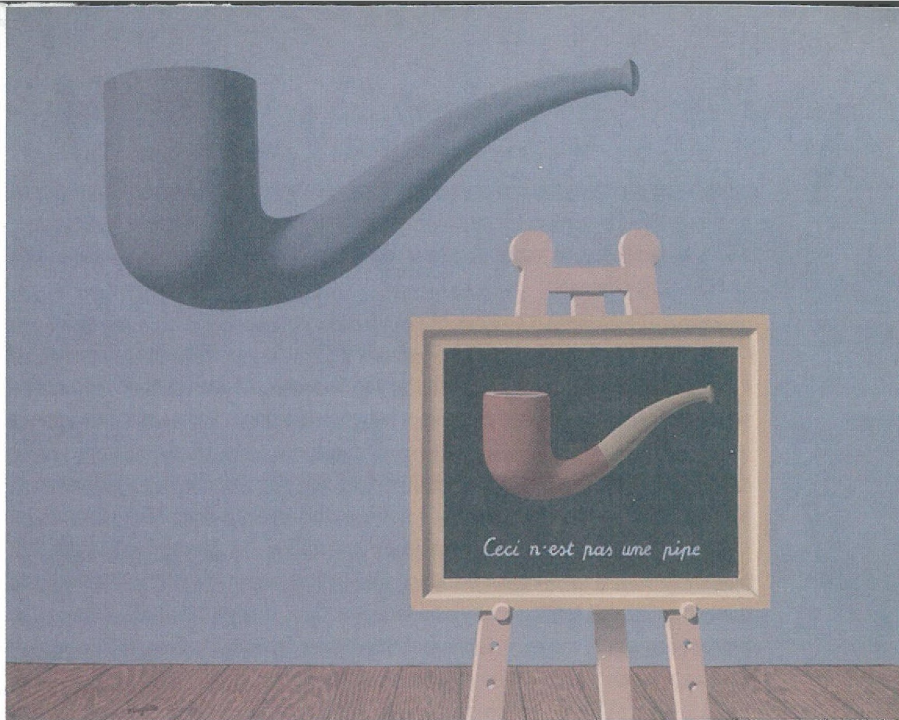


FIG. 1.7
René Magritte, *Les Deux Mysteres (The Two Mysteries)*, 1966

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.