

# Practices of Looking

An Introduction  
to Visual Culture

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## 1 Practices of Looking

### Images, Power, and Politics

Every day, we are in the practice of looking to make sense of the world. To see is a process of observing and recognizing the world around us. To look is to actively make meaning of that world. Seeing is something that we do somewhat arbitrarily as we go about our daily lives. Looking is an activity that involves a greater sense of purpose and direction. If we ask, "Did you see that?" we imply happenstance ("Did you happen to see it?"). When we say, "Look at that!" it is a command. To look is an act of choice. Through looking we negotiate social relationships and meanings. Looking is a *practice* much like speaking, writing, or signing. Looking involves learning to interpret and, like other practices, looking involves relationships of power. To willfully look or not is to exercise choice and influence. 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, fun or unpleasant, harmless or dangerous. There are both conscious and unconscious levels of looking. We engage in practices of looking to communicate, to influence and be influenced.

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: pleasure, desire, disgust, anger, curiosity, shock, or confusion. We invest the 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. A single image can serve a multitude of purposes, appear in a range of settings, and mean different things to different people. The roles played by



Weegee, *Their First Murder*, before 1945

images are multiple, diverse, and complex. This image, of school children in the early 1940s who see a murder scene in the street, was taken by photographer Weegee (whose real name was Arthur Fellig). Weegee was known for his images of crimes and violence in the streets of New York, where he would listen to a police radio in order to get to crime scenes early. In this photograph, he calls attention both to the act of looking at the forbidden and to the capacity of the still camera to capture heightened emotion. The children are looking at the murder scene with morbid fascination, as we look with equal fascination upon them looking.

The images we encounter every day span the social realms of popular culture, advertising, news and information exchange, commerce, criminal justice, and art. They are produced and experienced through a variety of media: painting, printmaking, photography, film, television/video, computer digital imaging, and virtual reality. One could argue that all of these media—including those that do not involve mechanical or technological *means of production*—are imaging technologies. Even paintings are produced with the "technology" of paint, brush, and canvas. We live in an increasingly image-saturated society where paintings, photographs, and electronic images depend on one another for their meanings. The most famous paintings of Western art history have been photographically and electronically

Van Gogh painting  
on coffee mug



reproduced, and many of these reproductions have been touched up or altered by means of computer graphics. For most of us, knowledge of famous paintings is not first-hand, but through reproductions in books and on posters, greeting cards, classroom slides, and television specials about art history. The technology of images is thus central to our experience of visual culture.

## 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 to do this. This process takes place through systems of representation, such as language and visual media, that have rules and conventions about how they are organized. A language like English has a set of rules about how to express and interpret meaning, and so, for instance, do the systems of representation of painting, photography, cinema, or television.

Throughout history, debates about representation have considered whether these systems of representation reflect the world as it is, such that they mirror it back to us as a form of *mimesis* or imitation, or whether in fact we construct the world and its meaning through the systems of representation we deploy. In this *social constructionist* approach, we only make meaning

of the material world through specific cultural contexts. This takes place in part through the language systems (be they writing, speech, or images) that we use. Hence, the material world only has meaning, and only can be “seen” by us, through these systems of representation. This means that the world is not simply reflected back to us through systems of representation, but that we actually construct the meaning of the material world through these systems.

Over time, images have been used to represent, make meaning of, and convey various sentiments about nature, society, and culture as well as to represent imaginary worlds and abstract concepts. Throughout much of history, for example, images, most of them paintings, have been used by religions to convey religious myths, church doctrines, and historical dramas. Many images have been produced to depict seemingly accurate renditions of the world around us, while others have been created to express abstract concepts and feelings such as love. Language and systems of representation do not reflect an already existing reality so much as they organize, construct, and mediate our understanding of reality, emotion, and imagination.

The distinction between the idea of reflection, or *mimesis*, and representation as a construction of the material world can often be difficult to make. The still life, for instance, has been a favored subject of artists for many centuries. One might surmise that the still life is simply about the desire to reflect, rather than make meaning of, material objects. In the still life on the next page, painted in 1642 by Dutch painter Pieter Claesz, an array of food and drink is carefully arranged on a table, and painted with an attention to each minute detail. The objects, such as the tablecloth, dishes, bread, carafe, and glass, are rendered with an attention to light and seem so lifelike that one imagines one could touch them. Yet, is this image simply a reflection of this particular scene, rendered with skill by the artist? Is it simply a *mimesis* of a scene, painted for the sake of demonstrating skill? Claesz worked in the seventeenth century, when Dutch painters were fascinated with the still life form, and painters painted many such works with attention to creating the illusion of material objects on canvas. The Dutch still life ranged in form from those that were straightforwardly representational to those that were deeply symbolic. Many were not simply about a composition of food and drink, but replete with allusions and symbolism, as well as philosophical ideas. Many works, such as this, were concerned with depicting the transience of earthly life through the ephemeral materiality of food. They call forth the senses through the

Pieter Claesz, *Still Life with Stoneware Jug, Wine Glass, Herring, and Bread*, 1642



depiction of foods which are associated with particular aromas, in which partially eaten foods evoke the experience of eating. In this work, the fare is simple, a reference to the everyday food of the common people, yet one can also see the potential religious allusions of bread, wine, and fish to Christian rituals.<sup>1</sup> Yet, even if we simply read this image as a representation of food without any symbolism, its original meaning was derived from its depiction of what food and drink meant in seventeenth-century Holland. Here, the language of painting is used to create a particular set of meanings according to a set of conventions about realistically depicting the material world. We will discuss concepts of realism more in Chapter 4. Here, we want to note that this painting produces meanings about these objects, rather than simply reflecting some meaning that is already within them.

Representation is thus a process through which we construct the world around us, even through a simple scene such as this, and make meaning from it. 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 at the

definitions of representation. In this painting, for example, Surrealist painter René Magritte comments upon the process of representation. Entitled *The Treachery of Images* (1928–29), 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, since this is not a pipe itself but rather the representation of a pipe; it is a painting rather than the material object itself. Philosopher Michel Foucault elaborates these ideas in a short text about this painting and a drawing by Magritte that preceded it.<sup>2</sup> Not only does he address the painting’s implied commentary about the relationship between words and things, he also considers the complex relationship among the drawing, the painting, their words, and their referent (the pipe). One could not pick up and smoke this pipe. So, Magritte can be seen to be warning the viewer not to mistake the image for the real thing. He marks the very act of naming, drawing our attention to the word “pipe” itself, and its function in representing the object. Both the word “pipe” and the image of the pipe represent the material object pipe, and in pointing this out, Magritte asks us to consider how they produce meaning about it. Thus, when we stop and examine the process of representation, as Magritte



René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*), 1928–29



asks us to do, a process that we normally take for granted, we can see the complexity of how words and images produce meaning in our world.

### The myth of photographic truth

The rules and conventions of different systems of representation vary, and we attribute different sets of cultural meanings to each—such as paintings, photographs, and television images. Many of the images discussed in this book were produced by cameras and through photographic or electronic technologies. These images belong to the various worlds of fine art, public art, advertising, popular culture, alternative media, the news media, and science.

No matter what social role an image plays, 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 should be shot and how to shoot it. Yet even in surveillance video, someone has programmed the camera to record a particular part of a space and framed that space in a particular way. In the case of many automatic video and still-photography cameras designed for the consumer market, aesthetic choices like 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 such as clarity and legibility. These mechanisms are invisible to the user—they are *black-boxed*, relieving the photographer of various decisions. Yet, it remains the photographer who frames and takes the image, not the camera itself. At the same time, 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, or electronic (video or computer-generated), 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 camera-generated images.

Photography was developed in Europe in the early nineteenth century, when concepts of *positivist* science held sway. Positivism involves the belief that *empirical* truths can be established through visual evidence. An empirical truth is something that can be proven through experimentation, in

particular through the reproduction of an experiment with identical outcomes under carefully controlled circumstances. In positivism, the individual actions of the scientist came to be viewed as a liability in the process of performing and reproducing experiments, since it was thought that the scientist's own subjectivity would influence or prejudice the objectivity of the experiment. Hence, machines were regarded as more reliable than humans. Similarly, photography is a method of producing images that involves a mechanical recording device (the camera) rather than hand recording (pencil on paper). In the context of positivism, the photographic camera was taken to be a scientific tool for registering reality and was regarded by its early advocates as a means of representing the world more accurately than hand-rendered images.

Since the mid-1800s, there have been many arguments for and against the idea that photographs are objective renderings of the real world that provide an unbiased truth because cameras are seemingly detached from a subjective, particular human viewpoint. 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. We refer to this concept as the myth of *photographic truth*. For instance, 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. As such, it is perceived to speak the truth. At the same time, the truth-value of photography has been the focus of many debates, in contexts such as courtrooms, about the different "truths" that images can tell.

Camera images are also associated with truth-value in more everyday settings. A photograph in a family album is often perceived to tell the truth, such as the fact that a particular family gathering took place, a vacation was taken, or a birthday was celebrated. Photographs have been used to prove that someone was alive at a given place and time in history. For instance, after the Holocaust, many survivors sent photographs to their families from whom they had been long separated as an affirmation of their being alive. It is a paradox of photography that although we know that images can be ambiguous and are easily manipulated or altered, particularly with the help of computer graphics, 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.

Yet, the sense that photographic images are evidence of the real also gives them a kind of magical quality that adds to their documentary quality. The images created by cameras can be simultaneously informative and expressive. This photograph was taken by Robert Frank in his well-known photographic essay, *The Americans*, which he created while travelling around the USA in the mid-1950s. The image documents a segregated group of white and black passengers on a city trolley in New Orleans. 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 does more than document facts. For some contemporary viewers, this image is magically moving insofar as it evokes powerful emotions about the momentous changes about to occur in the American South. The picture was taken just before laws, policies, and social mores concerning segregation began to

Robert Frank,  
Trolley—New Orleans,  
1955–56



undergo radical changes in response to Civil Rights activism. The faces of the passengers each look outward with different expressions, responding in different ways to the journey. It is as if the trolley itself represents the passage of life, and the expressive faces of each passenger the way in which they confront and experience their life. The trolley riders seem to be eternally held within the vehicle, a group of strangers thrown together to journey down the same road, just as the Civil Rights era in the South brought together strangers for a political journey. Thus, this photograph is valuable both as an empirical, informational document and as an expressive vehicle. The power of the image derives not only from its status as photographic evidence but from its powerful evocation of the emotions of life's struggles. It thus demonstrates the photograph's capacity both to present evidence and to evoke a magical or mythical quality.

In addition, this image, like all images, has two levels of meaning. French theorist Roland Barthes described these two levels with the terms *denotative* and *connotative* meaning. An image can *denote* certain apparent truths, providing documentary evidence of objective circumstances. The denotative meaning of the image refers to its literal, descriptive meaning. The same photograph *connotes* more culturally specific meanings. Connotative meanings rely on the cultural and historical context of the image and its viewers' lived, felt knowledge of those circumstances—all that the image means to them personally and socially. 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. The dividing line between what an image denotes and what it connotes can be ambiguous, as in this image, where the facts of segregation alone may produce particular connotative associations for some viewers. These two concepts help us to think about the differences between images functioning as evidence and as works that evoke more complex feelings and associations. Another image of passengers on a trolley might connote a very different set of meanings.

Roland Barthes used the term *myth* to refer to the cultural values and beliefs that are expressed at this level of connotation. For Barthes, myth is the hidden set of rules and conventions through which meanings, which are in reality 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, hence literal or natural. Barthes argued

that a French ad for Italian sauce and pasta is not simply presenting a product but is producing a myth about Italian culture—the concept of “Italianicity.”<sup>3</sup> This message, wrote Barthes, is not for Italians, but is specifically about a French concept of Italian culture. Similarly, one could argue that the contemporary concepts of beauty and thinness naturalize certain cultural norms of appearance as being universal. These norms constitute a myth in Barthes’s terms, because they are historically and culturally specific, not “natural.”

Barthes’s concepts of myth and connotation are particularly useful in examining notions of photographic truth. Among the range of images produced by cameras, there are cultural meanings that affect our expectations and uses of images. We do not, for example, bring the same expectations about the representation of truth to newspaper photographs as we do to television news images or to film images that we view in a movie theater. A significant difference among these forms is their relationship to time 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. As moving images, cinematic and television images are combined with sound and music in narrative forms, and their meaning often lies in the sequence of images rather than its individual frames.

Similarly, the cultural meanings of and expectations about computer and digital images are different from those of conventional photographs. Because computer images can look increasingly like 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. In addition, computer graphics programs can be used to modify or rearrange the elements of a “realistic” photograph. Widespread use of digital imaging technologies since the 1990s has dramatically altered the status of the photograph, particularly in the news media. Digital imaging thus can be said to have partially eroded the public’s trust in the truth-value of photography and the camera image as evidence. Yet, at the same time, the altered image may still appear to represent a photographic truth. The meaning of an

image, and our expectations of it, is thus tied to the technology through which it is produced. We will discuss this further in Chapter 4.

## 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 is a much more pervasive, mundane process in which we all engage, whether we are aware of it or not. For our purposes, we define ideology as the broad but indispensable, shared set of values and beliefs through which individuals live out their complex relations to a range of social structures. Ideologies are widely varied and exist at all levels of all cultures. 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 about not only the way things are but the way we all know things should be. Images and media representations are some of the forms through which we persuade 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 responded to. Film and television are media through which we see reinforced 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 is that they appear 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 are thus, like Barthes's concept of myth, connotations parading as denotations.

Visual culture is integral to ideologies and power relations. Ideologies are produced and affirmed through the social institutions in 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, and images are also used for regulation, categorization, identification, and evidence. Shortly after photography was developed 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). But photographs were also widely regarded 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, classify, and study populations. 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 controlling popula-



tions today? We live in a society in which portrait images are frequently used, like fingerprints, as personal identification—on passports, driver's licenses, credit cards, and identification cards for schools, the welfare system, and many other institutions. Photographs are a primary medium for evidence in the criminal justice system. We are accustomed to the fact that most stores and banks are outfitted with surveillance cameras and that our daily lives are tracked not only through our credit records, but through camera records. On a typical day of work, errands, and leisure, the activities of people in cities are recorded, often unbeknownst to them, by numerous cameras. Often these images stay within the realm of identification and surveillance, where they go unnoticed by most of us. 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, finger-



prints, and photographs. The conventions of the mug shot were presumably familiar to most people who saw the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Frontal and side views of suspects' unsmiling, unadorned faces are shot. These 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. O. J. Simpson's mug shot seemed to be no different from any other in this regard.

Whereas *Newsweek* used the mug shot as it was, *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, the magazine's publishers do not allow this cover to be reproduced. What ideological assumption might be said to underlie this concept of aesthetics? Critics charged that *Time* was following the historical convention of using darker skin tones to connote evil and to imply guilt. In motion pictures made during the first half of this century, when black and Latino performers appeared, they were most often cast in the roles of villains and evil characters. This convention tied into the lingering ideologies of nineteenth-century racial science, in which it was proposed that certain bodily forms and attributes, 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. Thus, darkness came to connote negative qualities. 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 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.

Like Simpson's mug shot, images often move across social arenas. Documentary images can appear in advertisements, amateur photographs and videotapes can become news images, and news images are sometimes incorporated into art works. Each change in context produces a change in meaning.

## How we negotiate the meaning of images

The capacity of images to affect us as viewers and consumers is dependent on the larger cultural meanings they invoke and the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are viewed. Their meanings lie not within their image elements alone, but are acquired when they are "consumed," viewed, and interpreted. The meanings of each image are multiple; they are created each time it is viewed.

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; the codes we learn become second nature. Just as we recognize the meaning of most road sign symbols almost immediately, we read, or *decode*, more complex images almost instantly, giving little thought to our process of decoding. For instance, when we see the graphic of a torch that represents the Olympic Games, we do not need to think through the process whereby we come to make that association.

But our associations with symbols and codes and their meanings are far from fixed. Some images demonstrate this process of change quite nicely by playing on accepted conventions of representation to make us aware of the

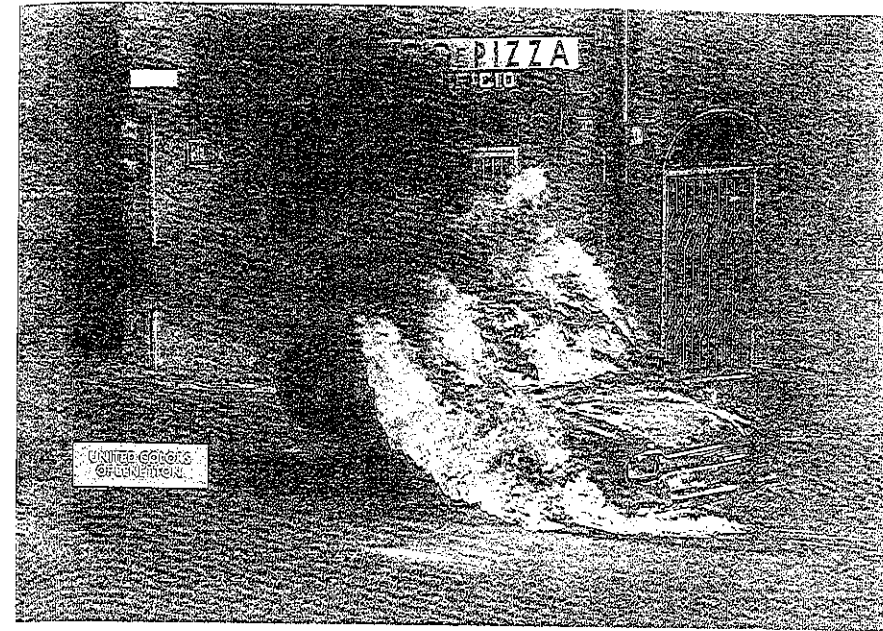


almost arbitrary connections we take for granted between codes and their meanings. The humor of the napkin advertisement on the previous page depends on the viewer's knowledge of the ways that women are typically posed in a state of undress in fashion advertisements. By putting a man in a pose coded as female, and making a joke about what a napkin "covers" on a man, the advertisement puts a humorous spin on the convention. This gender play might persuade potential consumers that the company advertised is not only aware of the gendered nature of advertisement codes and products such as napkins, it is hip enough to make a reflexive joke about it.

We decode images by interpreting clues 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 like 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.

This advertisement by the clothing company Benetton has many layers of meaning. This image denotes a car on fire on a city street. From a formal perspective, it is visually arresting; the flames create a striking image against the dark background, setting an overall tone of danger and tension. Its impact comes in part from what it demonstrates about the power of documentary photography—the capacity of the camera to capture a fleeting moment in time and freeze it. But what does this image mean? Where and when was it taken? What kind of event does it depict? We are offered few clues about its socio-historical elements; there is no caption, no descriptive text through which the viewer might place this picture. Close examination reveals only that a sign in the background appears European and the make of the car may place it within a 1990s time frame.

However, the image's time frame and placement within an advertisement offers other clues. Prior to the 1970s, an image like this one would most likely



have signified civil unrest or urban street crime—issues of national or local concern. In the 1990s, it was more likely that the photograph connoted acts of terrorism as they occurred routinely throughout the world in the late twentieth century. Indeed, in the 1990s the connotation of terrorism was often automatically overlaid onto images of street violence because of widespread concerns, generated in part by the news media, about the apparently random and arbitrary nature of terrorist violence. When this image signifies terrorism, the specificity of its individual elements (which are not identified in the ad) lose their power—it no longer matters where and when the event took place. What matters is the larger symbolic meaning. In addition, the fact that this image is presented in an advertisement adds another level of connotation—the image is intended to transfer upon the name Benetton, and by extension the products offered by Benetton, a sense of social concern for the problems of the world, including terrorism. It could be argued that Benetton selected this generic image to invoke this contemporary issue, and to convey to viewers that Benetton, unlike most other companies, is concerned with current political issues. The ad constructs the idea that Benetton is a company with

a political stance that sells clothes to people who care about the realities of contemporary politics on a global scale. We will discuss this sort of advertising strategy at more length in Chapter 7.

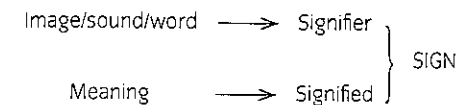
This process of interpretation is derived from *semiotics*. Every time we interpret an image around us (to understand what it *signifies*), whether consciously or not, we are using the tools of semiotics to understand its signification, or meaning. The principles of semiotics were formulated by American philosopher Charles Peirce in the nineteenth century and Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in the early twentieth century. Both proposed important theories. Saussure's writing, however, has had the 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 that 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 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 introduced the idea of a science of signs a bit before Saussure developed his *Course in General Linguistics*. Peirce believed that language and thought are processes of sign interpretation. For Peirce, meaning resides not in the initial perception of a sign, 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 have since been explored by film scholars and theorists of images, including Roland Barthes, to understand visual systems of representation, and Peirce's concepts subsequently have been used for visual analysis. For instance, film scholars adapted Saussure's method to analyze the language-like systems underlying the meanings produced in films. As with language, films were understood to embody these systems not because their directors or producers intentionally used them, but because the language of

film involved a set of rules or codes. 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 and based on Saussure, since it offers a clear and direct way to understand how images create 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/image. In the Benetton ad, one interpretation could be that the burning car is the signifier, and terrorism is the signified. The image (or word) and its meaning together (the signifier and signified together) form the *sign*.



As in the Benetton advertisement, an image or word can have many meanings and constitute many signs. In certain contexts, this image might mean civil unrest, wartime violence, etc., each of which constitutes a different sign. Hence, 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 the viewers who interpret it. We live in a world of signs, and it is the labor of our interpretation that makes meaning of those signs. It is important to remember that we use semiotics all the time without labeling it as such or recognizing our interpretative acts.

Often the meaning of an image is predominantly derived from the objects within the frame. For instance, Marlboro advertisements are well known for their equation of Marlboro cigarettes 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 romanticized idea of freedom that stands in contrast to the more confined lives of most workers. 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 he exists by implication. This ad campaign also testifies to the ways that 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. In 1999, the well-known huge Marlboro Man billboard on Sunset Strip in Hollywood was taken down and replaced by an anti-smoking billboard that mocked this icon of masculinity. This remake effectively used the Marlboro Man to create a new sign, that of Marlboro Man = loss of virility, or smoking = impotence.

Our understanding of this image 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 this image cultural knowledge of the changing role of men and the recognition that it indicates a fading stereotype of virility. The Marlboro Man has recently been depicted on a motorcycle, but this updated figure nonetheless derives its meaning from the contrast it presents to the traditional masculine image. Contemporary advertisements of men driving 4 × 4 vehicles and pickup trucks through rough landscapes also reference the codes of the Marlboro Man to suggest an updated version of rugged male individualism. These vehicles, many of the advertisements suggest, provide a new high-tech way to meet the challenges of nature, allowing consumers to explore the wilderness without the physical hardships of being exposed to the elements. Clearly, our interpretation of images often depends upon historical context and the cultural knowledge we bring to them—the conventions they use or play off of, the other images they refer to, and the familiar figures and symbols they include.

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 can show us that a variety of images can convey many different meanings. As we noted, Barthes’s model is not the only model of semiotics. For example, Charles Peirce worked with a somewhat different model in which the signifier (word/image) is distinguished not only from the signified (meaning) but also from the *referent*, or the object itself. In addition, Peirce defined categories of signs based on different kinds of relationships between signifiers and signifieds. For instance, Peirce made a distinction

between *indexical*, *iconic*, and *symbolic signs*. These categories have been useful for the study of images, and we will discuss them in Chapter 4.

### 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

Vincent Van Gogh,  
*Iris*, 1889





cultural factors. The painting of irises on the previous page by Vincent Van Gogh 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. The painting in itself does not reveal its worth, rather this is information we bring to an interpretation of it. Why is this painting worth so much? 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. *Irises* is considered authentic because it has been proven that it is an original work by Van Gogh, not a copy. Van Gogh's work is valued because it is believed to be among the best examples of the innovative painting style of *modernism* in 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 lived an unhappy and mentally unstable life, 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 judgements made by art historians about his work. This information, while extraneous to the work, contributes to its 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.

This painting thus gains its economic value through cultural determinations concerning what society judges to be important in assessing works of art. Many factors contribute to the value of this painting. It is one of relatively few works by the famous painter. It is regarded as authentic because it bears the artist's signature and has been verified by art historians. The artist has international fame and notoriety that go beyond the work itself to include his personality and life history. 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 often know a work of art is important because it is encased in a gilded frame. This Häagen Dazs advertisement humorously comments on this convention by placing the product within such a frame to signify its status as the “masterpiece” of ice creams. We might assume that a work of art is valuable simply because it is on display in a prestigious museum or, as is the case with a certain number of very famous images, such as the *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci, because it is displayed behind protective glass and surrounded by crowds of onlookers. In the 1910s, artist

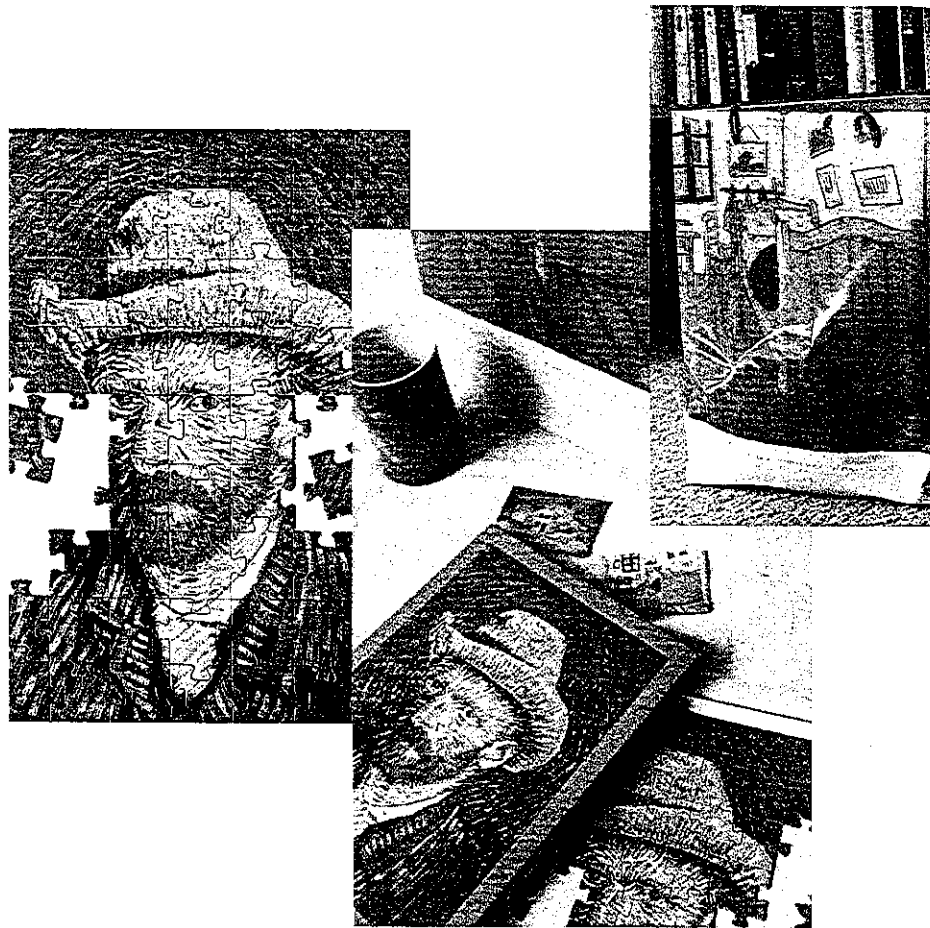
Marcel Duchamp took a jab at this practice of venerating art objects in his “readymades,” gallery and museum displays composed of mundane everyday objects such as a bicycle wheel. In April of 1917 Duchamp contributed a urinal, titled *The Fountain* and signed with the pseudonym R. Mutt, to a



The *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre

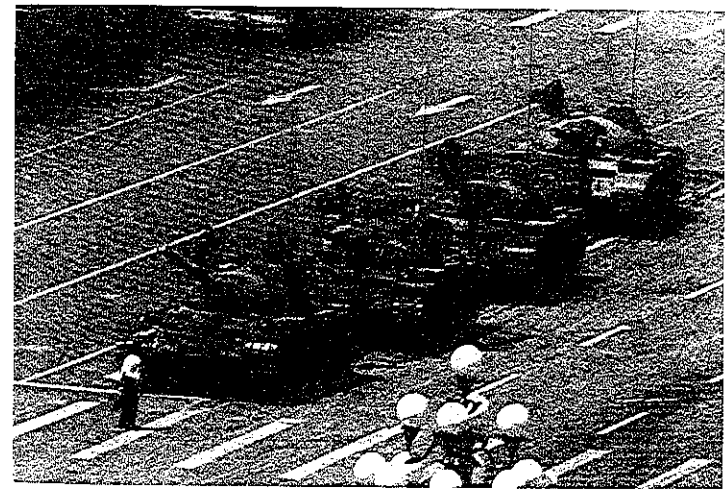
highly publicized painting exhibition he helped to organize. The exhibition's other organizers were offended by the piece and its clear message about art's value, taste, and the practices of display; they threw it out of the show. Duchamp subsequently became the cause célèbre of *Dada*, a movement that reflexively poked fun at the conventions of high art and museum display conventions.

While the fine art object often is valued because it is unique, it also is valued because it can be 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. Hence, the value of the original results not only from its uniqueness but from its being the source from which reproductions are made. The manufacturers who produce art reproductions (posters, T-shirts, greeting cards, etc.) and the consumers who purchase and display these items give value to the work of art by making it available to many people as an item of popular culture. We will discuss this aspect of image reproduction further in Chapter 4.

There are other kinds of values that adhere to images in our culture—for example, the value of an image to provide information and make distant events accessible to large audiences. 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. 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.



Chinese student  
stopping tanks at  
Tiananmen Square,  
Beijing, 1989

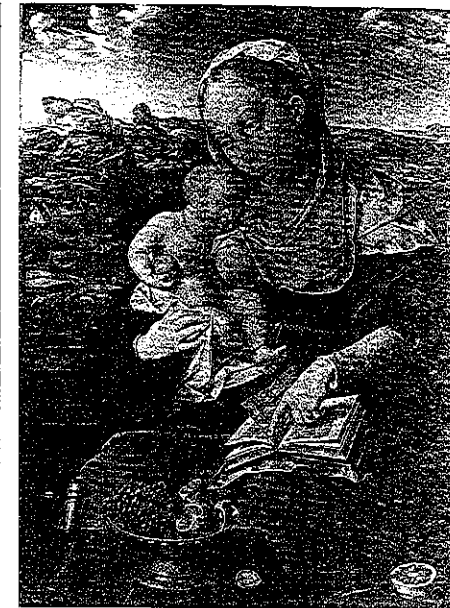
The television news image on the previous page of the student protest at Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989 can be said to be a valuable image, although the criteria for its value have nothing to do with the art market or its monetary value. The value of this image is based in part on its specialness (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. Its value is also derived from its powerful depiction of the courage of one student before the machinery of military power. Whereas its denotative meaning is simply a young man stopping a tank, its connotative meaning is commonly understood to be the importance of individual actions in the face of injustice. This image thus has value not as a singular image (once broadcast, it was not one image but millions of images on many different TV sets), but through its speed of transmission, informative value, and its political statement. We can say that it is culturally valuable because it makes a profound statement about human will, and has thus become an image *icon*.

### Image icons

This image of the lone student at Tiananmen Square has value as an icon of world-wide struggles for democracy, precisely because many students lost their lives in the protests. 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 universal meaning and the capacity to evoke similar responses across all cultures and in all viewers. For example, the image of mother and child is ubiquitous in Western art. It is widely believed to represent universal concepts of maternal emotion, the essential bond between a mother and her offspring, and the dependence of that child upon her. This image is perceived as an icon of motherhood and, by extension, the importance of motherhood throughout the world and in all human history. The sheer number of paintings created with a mother and child theme throughout the history of Western art attests not simply to the centrality of the Madonna figure in Christianity but also to the idea that the bond between mother and child represented



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



Joos van Cleve, *Virgin and Child*, 1525

in images like this is universally understood to be natural, not culturally constructed.

What would it mean to question the assumptions underpinning these concepts of the universal? It 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, but nor do they represent universal values. 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. Furthermore, these images situated these figures within particular cultural landscapes, Raphael's Madonna before an Italian landscape, and van Cleve's surrounded by symbols of Dutch culture.

It is in relationship to this tradition of Madonna and child paintings that more recent images of women and children gain meaning. For instance, the photograph on the next page by Dorothea Lange depicts a woman, who is also



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

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 hardly a nurturing figure. She is 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 traditional representation. Like the earlier images, this photograph denotes a mother with children, but it casts this social relationship in terms of hunger, poverty, struggle, loss, and strength. Thus, it can be read in a number of ways.

Image icons can also evoke pleasure and desire. One could argue, for instance, that this image of Marilyn Monroe is an icon of glamour. Monroe

embodies many of the stereotypical ingredients for twentieth-century American concepts of feminine beauty and sexuality—her wavy blond hair, open smile, and full figure. Concepts of glamour and sexiness form the basis of most advertising. What counts as glamorous or sexy, however, changes according to shifts in cultural ideas about beauty and visual pleasure. The cultural preference for full-figured women was replaced in the late twentieth century by an idealization of a thin or athletic body. As John Berger has written, glamour is the quality of being envied.<sup>4</sup> Monroe's glamour is derived in part through the combination of her apparent accessibility to the camera (and, by extension, to the viewer) through the medium of photography, and the unattainable, distant quality of her image. We want what she has precisely because it appears to be beyond our reach.

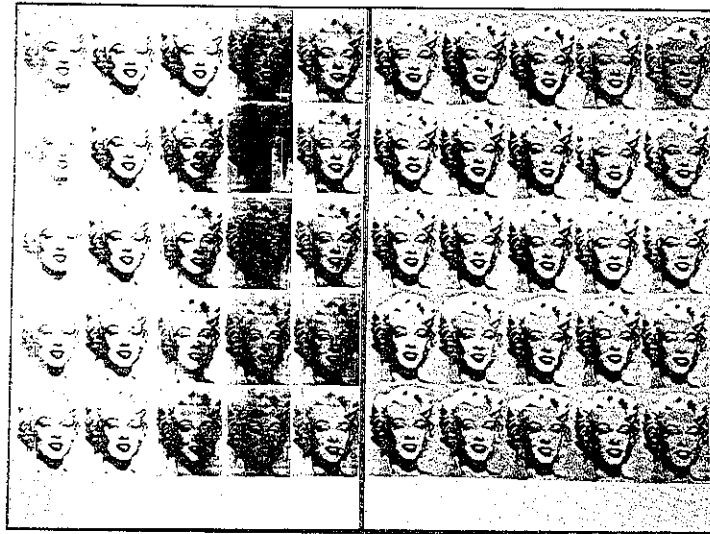
Artist Andy Warhol made works about the commodity culture that rendered women like Marilyn Monroe cultural icons whose images were familiar to virtually the entire nation. Warhol took an iconic, glamorous image of Marilyn Monroe and printed multiple versions of it into a colorful grid. His *Marilyn Diptych* (1962) on the next page comments not only upon the star's iconic status as a glamour figure, but also on the role of the star as media commodity—as a product of the entertainment industry that could be infinitely reproduced for mass consumption. Warhol's work emphasizes one of the most important aspects of contemporary images: the capacity to reproduce them in many 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 them 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 mass-produced object to be consumed.

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 glamour are specific to particular cultures



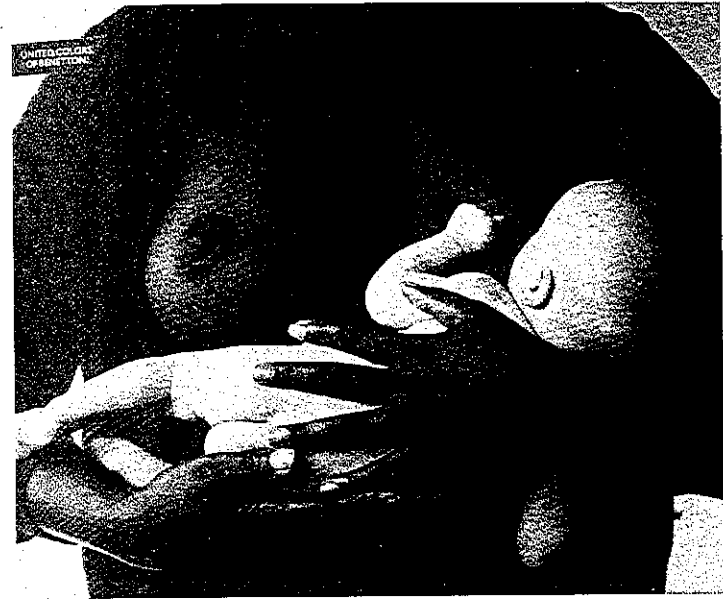


Andy Warhol, *Marilyn*  
*Diptych*, 1962



at particular moments in time. One could regard them as indicators of the cultural values attributed to women throughout history, and the restrictive roles women have often been allocated (mother or sex symbol, virgin or vamp). As we have noted, images have divergent meanings in different cultural and historical contexts.

When, for instance, Benetton produced this advertisement 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. While in certain contexts, this image might connote racial harmony, in the United States it carried other connotations, most troubling the history of slavery in the United States and the use of black women slaves as "wet nurses" to breast-feed the white children of their 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 where the image's meanings are *overdetermined* by historical factors. Similarly, the classical art history image of Madonna and child may not serve

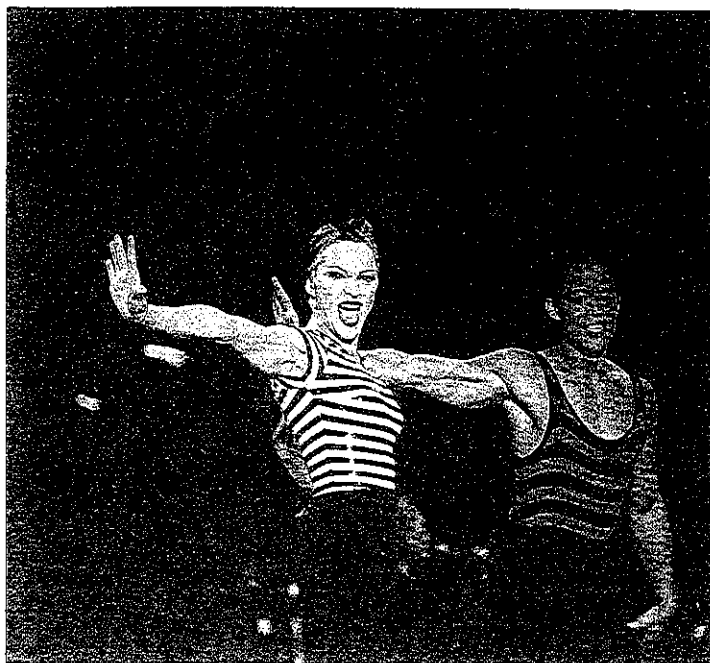


as an icon for motherhood in many other cultures, but rather as an example of specifically Western and particularly Christian beliefs about women's role as mothers.

When images acquire the status of icons, which are commonly understood, they also can become the object of humorous or ironic interpretations. For instance, pop star Madonna gained notoriety by playing off both Madonna and Marilyn Monroe. Madonna borrowed and reworked the elements of both these cultural icons. Not only did she use the name Madonna, early in her career she wore and used as props various symbols of Catholicism, such as crosses. Similarly, at one point she assumed Monroe's blond hair color and the look of her glamorous 1940s wardrobe. Through these acts of cultural *appropriation*, Madonna both acquired the power of these icons and reflected *ironically* on their meaning in the climate of the 1980s and 1990s. In contemporary culture, many cultural icons are thus reused, parodied, and ironically updated.

To interpret images is to examine the assumptions that we and others bring to them, and to decode the visual language that they "speak." All images

Madonna in one of her many identities



contain layers of meaning that include their formal aspects, their cultural and socio-historical 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 will examine the many ways that viewers create meaning when they engage in looking.

#### Notes

1. See Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1988), ch. 3.

2. See Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, with illustrations and letters by René Magritte, translated and edited by James Harkness (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1983).
3. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," from *Image Music Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 34.
4. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York and London: Penguin, 1972), 131.

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