INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses two approaches to visual analysis: the visual semiotics of Roland Barthes (1973, 1977) and iconography. These two approaches ask the same two fundamental questions: the question of representation (what do images represent and how?) and the question of the 'hidden meanings' of images (what ideas and values do the people, places and things represented in images stand for?). With respect to the images in Figure 5.1, taken from a Dutch junior high-school geography textbook (Bols et al., 1986), these questions would become: (1) Who and what are the (kinds of) people, places and things depicted in these two images, and how do we recognize them as such; and (2) what ideas and values do we associate with these depicted people, places and things, and what is it that allows us to do so? But where Barthian visual semiotics studies only the image itself, and treats cultural meanings as a given currency which is shared by everyone who is at all acculturated to contemporary popular culture, and which can then be activated by the style and content of the image, iconography also pays attention to the context in which the image is produced and circulated, and to how and why cultural meanings and their visual expressions come about historically.

The formulation 'people, places and things' indicates that Barthian visual semiotics and iconography deal, by and large, with the individual bits and pieces within images; in other words, they concentrate on what, in the case of language, we would call 'lexis' or vocabulary. The social semiotic approach described in Chapter 7 has relatively little to say about 'visual lexis' and hence one or both of the approaches described here would form a very useful complement to it. On the other hand, Barthian semiotics and iconography do not have very much to say about visual 'syntax'. Although they do not stop at inventories of the meanings of the individual people, places and things in images and also put them together to show how they add up to a coherent whole, they do not usually identify specific patterns for this or use specific methods to put the meanings together. (Iconography sometimes does, but generally within the confines of a specific style, school or period.) Again, this suggests possibilities for combining social semiotics and the approaches described here. The formulation 'people, places and things' might also seem to exclude 'abstract things'. While it is true that Barthes has concentrated on figurative images, more specifically photographic images (see Groupe µ, 1992 for a structuralist approach to abstraction), and that iconography
Figure 5.1 'The Third World in Our Street' (from Bole et al., 1986).
has also emphasized figurative art, there is no reason why the methods described here cannot also be applied to 'abstract things', and I will try and show this in the course of the chapter.

Finally, this chapter should not be seen as an introduction to Barthian visual semiotics and iconography as a whole. It concentrates on the way in which 'public' images are analysed within these two approaches. It leaves aside, for instance, Barthes's later concerns with the immediate emotive impact of certain aspects of images, with the 'punctum' of the image (Barthes, 1982), or the concern of iconography with dating works of art and authenticating their authorship, and focuses on concepts and methods useful for contemporary studies of the visual representation of specific issues.

**SEMIOTICS**

In Barthian visual semiotics, the key idea is the layering of meaning. The first layer is the layer of *denotation*, of 'what, or who, is being depicted here?'. The second layer is the layer of *connotation*, of 'what ideas and values are expressed through what is represented, and through the way in which it is represented?'

**Denotation**

For Barthes, denotation is a relatively unproblematic issue. There is no 'encoding' into some kind of language-like code which must be learnt before the message can be deciphered. Perceiving photographs is closely analogous to perceiving reality because photographs provide a point-by-point correspondence to what was in front of the camera, despite the fact that they reduce this reality in size, flatten it and, in the case of black and white, drain it of colour. In the case of drawings and paintings the situation is not essentially different. Although the style of the artist provides a 'supplementary message', the content is still 'analogical to reality'. Here is how Barthes describes the denotation in one of his most often quoted examples: 'I am at the barber's and a copy of *Paris-Match* is offered me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the meaning of the picture' (1973: 116). In other words, the first layer, the denotative meaning, is here constituted by the act of recognizing who or what kind of person is depicted there, what he is doing, and so on.

Barthes realizes of course that we can only recognize what we already know. Describing a particular advertisement for pasta, he writes: 'We need to know what a tomato, a string-bag, a packet of pasta are, but this is a matter of almost anthropological knowledge. This message corresponds, as it were, to the letter of the image, and we can all agree to call it the literal message, as opposed to the symbolic message' (1977: 36). Anyone who has tried to describe images in this way knows that such knowledge is often lacking or existing only at a very general level. We may recognize a uniform as a uniform without knowing what kind of uniform it is, or a tool as a tool without having
the faintest idea what it is for. Normally such a lack of knowledge is not a problem. We are not even aware of it until we have to describe what we see. We have mentally put it into the category of things about which we do not need any detailed knowledge. Clearly images can be perceived at different levels of generality, depending on the context, depending on who the image is for, and what its purpose is. In describing denotive meaning it may therefore be desirable to introduce a little more context than Barthes did, to set a plausible level of generality for the reading. In the case of Figure 5.1 the text seeks to describe ‘others’ for an ‘us’ (remember the title of the chapter, ‘The Third World in Our Street’). This ‘us’ is Dutch teenagers in a high-school context in the second half of the 1980s. In this context the women on the left are ‘immigrants’ or, as the Dutch call them, allochtonen, ‘non-indigenous’ people. Whether they are Moroccan or Turkish is not relevant. Nor is it relevant that the three women are wearing different kinds of headscarves and that they are wearing them in different ways and that this perhaps carries meanings for people able to recognize different kinds of headscarves and different ways of wearing them. On the other hand, the boy on the right will be recognized as a Surinamer (even if he is not) by Dutch school children.

Is denotation entirely up to the beholder? Not necessarily. This too depends on the context. There are contexts (for example, certain forms of modern art) where a multiplicity of readings is allowed or even encouraged. But there are other contexts where the producers of the text have an interest in trying to get a particular message across to a particular audience, and in such cases there will be signs to point us towards the preferred level of generality. Even if I were a Turkish student of the Dutch school and if one of the three women in Figure 5.1 were my sister or my aunt, I would still also see that here she is depicted as a typical ‘allochtoon’. Taking such pointers into account could help overcome some of the problems involved in a Barthian description of visual denotation. I will list four. They can of course occur in various combinations:

**Categorization**

Captions can indicate the preferred level of generality. But even in the absence of a caption people can be visually represented as a specific individual (my sister, or my aunt) or a social type (‘an immigrant woman’). Typification comes about through the use of visual stereotypes, which may either be cultural attributes (objects, dress, hairstyle, etc.) or physiognomic attributes. The more these stereotypes overshadow a person’s individual features (or the individual features of an object or a landscape), the more that person (or object, or landscape) is represented as a type.

Headwear is a commonly used cultural attribute, or as Barthes calls it ‘object sign’ (think of the French beret, the workman’s cap, etc.) and in Figure 5.1 the headscarves are clearly more salient than the women’s individual features. The hairstyle of the boy on the right also stereotypes him to a degree, but less so, because it does not dominate the picture to the same degree. Again, the glamorous people in fashion magazines and advertisements can often disappear as individuals behind the hairstyles and the make-up that signify them as desirable social types. On the other hand, it is also possible to de-emphasize such cultural attributes. John Berger (1972: 111–12) compares...
Rembrandt’s early ‘Self-portrait with Saskia’ to a much later self-portrait. In the former the attributes of Rembrandt’s new-found wealth and status are prominently displayed. In the latter all the light falls on Rembrandt’s aged face, and everything else is reduced to a dark, shadowy outline.

Traditions of representation can also create *physiognomic* stereotypes. To the degree that these are exaggerated or otherwise made prominent in the representation (for example, by selecting a person or a picture of a person in whom they are prominent), the person depicted will be represented as a ‘type’ rather than as an individual. It can be argued that the pointed contrast between the blonde girl and the black boy stereotypes both the girl as typically Dutch and the boy as a typical second-generation Surinam immigrant.

**Groups vs. individuals**

Depicting people in groups rather than as individuals can have a similar effect, especially if similarity is enhanced by similar poses or synchronized action. The three women in Figure 5.1 not only look similar but also all walk in the same direction and are angled towards the viewer in more or less the same way. This reinforces the ‘they’re all the same effect’ that constitutes generalization. Elsewhere (van Leeuwen, in press) I have pointed out how in press photographs of the Gulf War allied soldiers were usually depicted as individuals, doing things like defusing bombs, writing letters home, and so on, and Iraqi soldiers as groups involved in synchronized actions like aiming guns and surrendering.

**Distancing**

Showing people from a distance (in a ‘long shot’) can also decrease their individuality and make them more into types, because from a distance we will be less able to discern their individual features. Figure 5.1 is again an example of this. The ‘immigrant women’ on the left are distant, the young people on the right closer, with obvious effects on the degree to which they can be seen as unique individuals.

**Surrounding text**

As already mentioned, the surrounding text (or adjacent pictures) can also provide pointers. Captions can give the name of depicted people, or describe them as types. But pictures and words may also contradict each other in this respect. The picture of a named individual may illustrate a generalizing text, for example. British documentaries made in the 1930s often showed highly generic shots of workers while a voice-over commentary would somewhat patronizingly call them by their first names.

**Connotation**

The second layer of meaning is *connotation*, the layer of the broader concepts, ideas and values which the represented people, places and things ‘stand for’, ‘are signs of’. The key idea is that the denotative meaning is already established, that we have, for
instance, already identified the three women as ‘allochtoons’. On this already established layer of recognition/interpretation a second meaning is then superimposed, the connotation. It can come about either through the cultural associations which cling to the represented people, places and things, or through specific ‘connotators’, specific aspects of the way in which they are represented, for example specific photographic techniques. In Mythologies (1973) Barthes concentrated on the former. In his essays on photography in Image, Music, Text (1977) he added the latter.

We already discussed the denotative meanings of Barthes’s saluting African soldier. Here is the whole quote, showing how his reading moves from denotation to connotation:

I am at the barber’s and a copy of Paris-Match is offered me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the meaning of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifyer, itself already formed with a previous system (a black soldier is giving the French salute); and there is a signifyed (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness). (1973: 116)

Such connotative meanings – in Mythologies (1973) Barthes called them ‘myths’ – are first of all very broad and diffuse concepts which condense everything associated with the represented people, places or things into a single entity (hence Barthes’s use of terms like ‘Frenchness’ and ‘militariness’ to indicate these meanings). Secondly, they are ideological meanings, serving to legitimate the status quo and the interests of those whose power is invested in it (in this case French colonialism and military role in Africa) – it should be remembered that Mythologies, though translated into English only in 1973, dates from 1957. Photographs are particularly good vehicles for such meanings, because they naturalize them. They can be thought of as just ‘finding’ these meanings on the street, as it were, rather than ‘constructing’ them. And they can also be thought of as not quite ‘spelling out’ their message, not saying it ‘in so many words’, so that that message can be construed as ‘read into it’ by the viewer, rather than as communicated by a powerful social institution (see Chapter 4).

Two elements of the content of images are singled out as especially frequent carriers of connotation, poses and objects. There is, says Barthes, an unwritten ‘dictionary’ of poses which is known to everyone who is at all exposed to the mass media, and whose ‘entries’ again have the kind of broad and ideologically coloured meanings that are typical of connotation:

Consider a press photograph of President Kennedy widely distributed at the time of the 1960 election: a half-length profile shot, eyes looking upwards, hands joined together. Here it is the very pose of the subject which prepares the raising of the signifyeds of connotation: youthfulness, spirituality, purity. The photograph clearly only signifies because of the existence of a store of stereotyped attitudes which form ready-made elements of significations (eyes raised heavenwards, hands clasped). (1977: 22)
At this point we should mention Goffman’s exemplary account of gendered poses and their meanings (1979), which comes close to realizing Barthes’s imagined ‘lexicon’, albeit for a restricted (but important) domain of meaning. Objects are equally significant:

Special importance must be accorded to what could be called the posing of objects, where the meaning comes from the objects photographed... The interest lies in the fact that the objects are accepted inducers of ideas (book case = intellectual) or, in a more obscure way, veritable symbols (the door to the gas chamber for Chessman’s execution with its reference to the funeral gates of ancient mythologies). Such objects constitute excellent elements of signification: on the one hand they are discontinuous and complete in themselves... while on the other they refer to clear familiar signifieds. They are thus the elements of a veritable lexicon. (1977: 23)

These examples analyse specific parts of images and are seen as ‘discontinuous’ individual ‘dictionary entries’, but Barthes also reads them together in a ‘discursive reading of object-signs’ (1977: 24). In this case, which he calls ‘syntax’, ‘the signifier of connotation is no longer to be found at the level of any one of the fragments of the sequence but at that... of the concatenation’ (ibid.). Here is an example of such a ‘discursive reading’:

Here, for example, is a ‘composition’ of objects: a window opening on to vineyards and tiled roofs; in front of the window a photograph album, a magnifying glass, a vase of flowers. Consequently we are in the country, south of the Loire (vines and tiles), in a bourgeois home (flowers on the table) whose owner, advanced in years (the magnifying glass), is reliving his memories (the photograph album) – François Mauriac in Malagar (photo in Paris-Match). The connotation which somehow ‘emerges’ from all these signifying units which are nevertheless ‘captured’ as though the scene were immediate and spontaneous, that is to say, without signification. The text renders the connotation explicit, developing the theme of Mauriac’s ties with the land. (1977: 25)

In this example the ‘object-signs’ are clearly denotative. The recognition of a place (‘the country, south of the Loire’) through specific attributes (‘vines and tiles’) is entirely similar to the recognition of a French soldier by his uniform, or an ‘immigrant woman’ by her headscarf. It is their concatenation which connotes ‘myths’ of the French countryside.

Connotation can also come about through the style of artwork or the techniques of photography, such as ‘framing, distance, lighting, focus, speed’ (1977: 44). Barthes calls this ‘photogenesis’ (1977: 23): ‘An inventory needs to be made of these techniques, but only insofar as each of them has a corresponding signified of connotation sufficiently constant to allow its incorporation in a cultural lexicon of technical “effects”.’

Several of the analytical categories discussed in Chapters 2 and 6 would fall under this heading, in particular ‘social distance’, ‘point of view’ and ‘modality’.

We can now attempt to apply this analysis more fully to Figure 5.1, looking first at the ‘object-signs’ in Table 5.1. Then we can look at the ‘photogenesis’ connotators in Table 5.2. Looking now at ‘syntax’, and putting together the ‘object-signs’ and the connotators, we get something like the following story. The first generation immigrants...
(the three women) do not adapt to ‘our’ culture. They walk through a typical Dutch street (bicycles), where Dutch women’s fashion is on sale for everyone (the shop behind the women), but nevertheless persist with their own ways (headscarves). Thus it is through their own fault that they do not integrate and remain distant (long shot) and detached (profile) from ‘us’ autochtone (‘indigenous’) Dutch. By contrast the younger generation of immigrants (the black man) adapt to our culture and even influence it as ‘ethnic’ culture transforms into consumer culture, including youth music and fashion (the plaited African hairstyle with beads). This makes love relationships possible (the man’s arm around the woman’s shoulder) between autochtone (the woman) and allochtone (the man) and may even hold out the promise of marriage (the ring).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denotative signifier</th>
<th>Denotative signified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Headscarves</td>
<td>Immigrant women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bicycles</td>
<td>Dutch street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dresses in shop window</td>
<td>Store with fashionable dresses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black skin plus Afro hairstyle</td>
<td>Second-generation Surinamer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blonde hair and white skin</td>
<td>Dutch girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rings</td>
<td>Betrothal and marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awning and corner of chair</td>
<td>Café</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connotator</th>
<th>Connotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angle: profile (3 women) semi-profile (couple)</td>
<td>Detachment Somewhat greater involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framing: long shot (3 women) closer shot (couple)</td>
<td>Socially distant from the viewer Socially closer to the viewer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This visual ‘story’ appeared in a school textbook in a time when the ‘asylum seekers’ question became crucial in The Netherlands, and in which legitimations for the curtailing of immigration and the expulsion of refugees were construed and promulgated by the government and the media – and evidently also by the education publishing industry. It is surely no less an ideological message than that of Barthes’s saluting African soldier.

Although I have given a qualitative analysis of a single picture, it is possible to use the concepts introduced here quantitatively (see also Chapter 2). The chapter from which Figure 5.1 was taken is called ‘The Third World in Our Street’ and depicts many ‘non-indigenous’ Netherlands. In Table 5.3 I tabulate how one of the ‘photogenia’ connotators was used in the geography textbook as a whole (VCS stands for ‘very close shot’, MCS for ‘medium close shot’, MS for ‘medium shot’, LS for ‘long shot’ and
VLS for 'very long shot'). Similar tabulations could be made for other ('object-sign' or 'photogenia') connotators.

The table shows that pictures of 'non-indigenous' people far outnumber pictures of 'indigenous' people: after all, they are 'the problem'. 'Indigenous' people we know already. No need to show them. The main indigenous people included are the girl from Figure 5.1, a television reporter and a teacher. Non-indigenous people are mostly seen from some distance, though strip cartoons also show non-indigenous people in close up - but, then, cartoon drawings can create distance in other ways, for instance through stereotypical modes of depiction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drawings</th>
<th>Photographs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-indigenous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VCS-MGS</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS-LS</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VLS</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ICONOGRAPHY**

Iconography distinguishes three layers of pictorial meaning: representational meaning, iconographical symbolism and iconological symbolism.

The idea of 'representational meaning' is close to that of 'denotation'. Panofsky speaks of it as the 'primary or natural subject matter' (1970: 53) and describes it as the recognition of what is represented on the basis of our practical experience, taking into account the stylistic conventions and the technical transformations involved in the representation - for example, the fact that in medieval paintings 'human beings, animals and inanimate objects seem to hang loose in space in violation of the law of gravity, without thereby pretending to be apparitions' (Panofsky, 1970: 60), or the fact that in photography the three-dimensional world is reduced and flattened.

The key idea is to see this kind of recognition as separate from the understanding of the conventional meanings that may be associated with what is represented. As an example he uses a gesture of greeting: a given viewer might recognize a picture as representing a man lifting his hat, but not know that lifting your hat is a conventional form of greeting. In the analysis of contemporary images this may seem an unnecessary complication, but in studying art works from the past it is not: faces may no longer be recognized, objects, gestures and activities may have become obsolete and establishing which of the people, places and things in a picture are iconographically significant (or, rather, were at the time of its production) may require quite a bit of research.

*Iconographical symbolism.* At this level, the 'object-signs', to use Barthes's term, not only denote a particular person, thing or place, but also the ideas or concepts attached to it. Panofsky glosses it as 'secondary or conventional subject matter' and explains it as follows:
[Iconographical symbolism] is apprehended by realizing that a male figure with a knife represents St Bartholomew, that a female figure with a peach in her hand is a personification of veracity, ... or that two figures fighting each other in a certain way represent the Combat of Vice and Virtue. In doing this we connect artistic motifs and combinations of artistic motifs (compositions) with themes or concepts. (1970: 54)

Elsewhere Panofsky notes that such iconographical symbolism also exists in twentieth-century popular art:

There arose, identifiable by standardised appearance, behaviour and attributes, the well-remembered types of the Vamp and the Straight Girl (perhaps the most convincing modern equivalents of the Medieval personifications of the Vices and Virtues), the Family Man and the Villain, the latter marked by a black moustache and a walking stick. (Quoted in Wollen, 1972: 146)

The conventions of the past are more easily recognized as conventions than those of the present, but I hope that the remainder of this chapter will show the value of studying contemporary images with the tools of iconographical analysis.

Iconological symbolism is what, in another context, would be called ideological meaning. To analyse it is, in Panofsky’s words, to ‘ascertain those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion’ (1970: 55):

When we try to understand [Da Vinci’s Last Supper] as a document of Leonardo’s personality, or of the civilization of the Italian High Renaissance, or of a peculiar religious attitude, we deal with the work of art as a symptom of something else which expresses itself in a countless variety of other symptoms, and we interpret its compositional and iconographic features as more particularised evidence of this ‘something else’. The discovery and interpretation of these ‘symbolical’ values (which are often unknown to the artist himself and may even emphatically differ from what he consciously intended to express) is the object of ‘iconology’, as opposed to ‘iconography’, (1970: 56)

There is thus a clear move here from identifying generally accepted conventions (which the artist would also be aware of) to an interpretation of which the artist may not be aware and which may not be generally accepted, but which is nevertheless an indispensable part of the analysis: ‘[The work of art] must also be understood as carrying a more-than-visual meaning’ (1970: 205).

Unlike Barthian visual semiotics, iconography uses both textual analysis and contextual research. With respect to art works of the past it is not possible to appeal to a shared knowledge of what ‘object-signs’ stand for (Barthes’s ‘accepted inducers of ideas’), and so iconography also uses intertextual comparison and documentary research to support its interpretations. Iconographers will find out as much as they possibly can of the circumstances under which the objects of their studies were created’, ‘collect and verify all the available factual information’, ‘read books on theology and mythology in order to identify the subject matter’, and ‘observe the interplay between the influences of literary sources and the effect of self-dependent
representational traditions to establish a history of iconographic formulas or "types" (Panofsky, 1970: 41). Using this approach in studying the contemporary visual representation of significant issues can bring to light the origins of certain conventions and undo the ideologically convenient effects of what Bourdieu has called 'genesis amnesia'.

In this chapter I use a contemporary study of visual racism as an example: Nederveen Pieterson's White on Black (1992). The book resulted from an exhibition held in Amsterdam in 1989, and subsequently in several other European capitals. This exhibition was based on a collection of visual materials (prints, drawings, magazines, books, posters, packaging, etc.) put together by Rufus Collins, an Afro-American theatre director working in Amsterdam who had been astonished at the continued existence of demeaning caricatures of black peoples which in the USA would have been proscribed long ago. Nederveen Pieterson's research on the collection, which used the iconographical approach, formed the basis of the exhibition, and later of the book. Drawing on it here will hopefully demonstrate the relevance of iconography for contemporary studies of visual representation.

It is sometimes argued that iconography favours the 'original meaning' of art works from the past when these art works might mean something quite different today. This is of course true. What today's tourists get out of medieval and Renaissance paintings differs from what the artists' contemporaries saw in them. Panofsky comments that the 'patina of age' of art works is an important part of their contemporary meaning, even though this was obviously not intended by the artists (1970: 38). And he realizes that the 're-creative experience of art' depends on the 'cultural equipment of the beholder' (1970: 40). Different readings will occur. And they will be set in the context of different hegemonic or counter-hegemonic social institutions (tourism, education, political movements, etc.) and serve different interests. Readings such as those produced by Nederveen Pieterson are critical readings, set in the context of the anti-racism movement, and hence strongly contested by many. Nederveen Pieterson shows, for instance, how the iconography of the 'golliwog' doll came about in the heyday of imperialism and colonialism, when black people in the USA and Britain were routinely the subject of racist mockery (and worse), and also how, when the National Committee on Racism in Children's Books started a campaign branding the golliwog as racist in the 1980s, the majority of the press came out in favour of the golliwog and reproached black people for their 'oversensitivity'. In 1998 the cover of the Guardian's weekly 'Guide' (11 April 1998) magazine featured a golliwog, to highlight a programme in which the detractors of the golliwog were depicted as examples of outdated 'political correctness'. In such a context it is good to remember where the symbol comes from.

Representational meaning

How does iconography establish that a particular image represents a particular (kind of) person (or object, or place)? Following Hermanen (1969), to whose work this chapter is much indebted, we can distinguish five types of answer to this question in the work of art historians.
The title indicates who or what is represented

One possibility is that the work itself includes a written title, or some other kind of inscription or caption. This title then indicates who or what is represented. Arguments like the following are common in the work of art historians: 'A miniature of Davalos with authentic contemporary inscription in the collection of Duke Ferdinand of Tirol proves that we are really confronted with a portrait of this field marshal' (Ingvar Bergström, quoted in Hermenen, 1969: 47).

Many of the pictures in Nederveen Pieterse's book fall into this category. For instance, a 1947 advertisement for Chesterfield cigarettes showed the boxer Joe Louis, as well as his signature, underneath the words 'Chesterfield, the Champ of Cigarettes' (1992: 149). A 1930s poster for the Dutch Musicians' Union featured the slogan 'Do not become a musician. Dying occupation for Dutchmen' and showed a Jewish and a black musician as well as the horn of a gramophone. The label 'buitenlander' ('foreigner') was superimposed over the face of the black musician. As also indicated in Nederveen Pieterse's captions, the boxer was represented as a specific individual and the musician as a type.

The identification of who or what is represented may also be done on the basis of personal experience

In the case of art works from the past this is obviously restricted to objects, buildings and landscapes which have survived relatively unchanged. And even then, we cannot always be sure that our recognition is at the appropriate level of generality. We may recognize a specific person when a generalized 'type' was meant to be recognized.

Identification on the basis of background research

As we have already seen, iconographers often undertake contextual research to establish who or what was portrayed. But this again may cause the identification to be made at an inappropriate level of generality. Hermenen quotes the case of a Rembrandt drawing called 'Girl sleeping'. There is, apparently, good evidence that Rembrandt's second wife was the sitter for the portrait. But the similarity between the portrait and Hendrickje is only slight, judging by other portraits. As also suggested by the title, it must have been Rembrandt's intention to portray a 'type', rather than a specific person.

Sometimes both the type and the person are meant to be recognizable. Edgar Wind (1937: 138), for instance, discusses the 'Bust of Commodus as Hercules' as follows: 'The Roman Emperor Commodus had his portrait sculptured with lifelike accuracy, yet he surrounded his head with the skin of a lion and held a heavy club in his hand. Being thus vested with the emblems of Hercules, he presented himself as possessed of his virtues.'

A similar kind of double identification occurs in Figure 5.2, where General Aguinaldo (1869–1964), leader of the Philippine resistance to American colonialism, is represented as a black dancing girl (and Uncle Sam as a white old lady). The dancing girl, like the black minstrel, was an iconographical symbol of black people as childlike, irresponsible and happy-go-lucky, as a simple 'child of nature, and one of the most interesting, selfless and happiest of creatures' (from a late nineteenth-century American 'advertising card', cf. Nederveen Pieterse, 1992: 137). As Nederveen
Pieterse points out, the cartoon is an instance of ‘niggering’, the comparison of colonized peoples with the American minorities (black people and Native Americans). 'The American press regularly represented Filipinos and other peoples as blacks', he writes, which shows that 'it is not ethnicity, or "race", that governs the imagery and discourse, but rather, the nature of the political relationship between peoples' (1992: 217). The hairstyle of the dancing girl remains a potent symbol, for instance in contemporary advertising (Figure 5.3) and more generally in fashion, where it is perhaps an example of what Halliday has called 'anti-language', the proud use of demeaning epithets ('blacks' used to be a derogatory term) and marks of identification.
The contemporary star system means that actors are often to be identified both as themselves and as their characters. This also extends to advertisements, for example a Dutch advertisement showing 'the black actor Donald Jones offering a variety of types of coffee' (Nederveen Pieterse, 1992: 194) and adopting the stereotyped subservient posture and smile of the 'black servant'. As Nederveen Pieterse comments: 'Over the years the role of blacks in the advertising and packaging of cocoa, chocolate and coffee has hardly changed. As tropical products these things seem to be permanently associated with the colour black and with black labour' (1992: 194).

![Advertisements for a Dutch brand of crisps](image)

**Figure 5.3** Advertisement for a Dutch brand of crisps (The Netherlands, 1987).
Identity established through reference to other pictures

The identity of a people, places or things can also be established on the basis of visual intertextuality, of their similarity to people, places or things in other pictures. An example from Panofsky:

There is little doubt that the youthful figure which . . . 'attracts the eyes of the beholder' in the Columbian altarpiece is the same person who appears in Roger's portrait of Charles the Bold. . . . The aggressive, somewhat prophetic mouth with its watchfully pinched corners, the large, impatient eyes, the sombre eyebrows and, most important, the long, unruly hair recur in both pictures; to judge from the many other portraits of personages belonging to the entourage of Philip the Good, it would seem that at this most formal of all courts no one but the Crown Prince could afford to wear his hair as though there were no scissors and combs. (1953: 286)

In the contemporary media, with its plethora of photographic images of the famous and infamous, this type of recognition is of course very common. No 'title' is needed for the recognition of runner Nellie Cooman in an advertisement (see Figure 5.8 on page 113), although with time such visual recognizability will fade, as perhaps is already the case of Joe Louis cited above. The situation becomes a little more complex when we also include the recognition of 'types'. Nederveen Pieterse (1992: 131) sums up the following characteristics of the type of the 'black servant' (many of them of course also have iconographical significance):

- the smile expressing availability;
- the servant depicted as smaller, lower or in the background;
- a slight stoop in posture which makes his body seem shorter or smaller and which suggests subjection;
- a bend in the knees which, as in reverence, expresses subjection;
- watching the eyes of the person being served — a look which does not have to be reciprocated; on the contrary, the person served usually looks past the servant;
- a physical distance between the servant and served which denotes social distance and status difference.

Identification on the basis of verbal descriptions

Fictitious people, places and things may be identified on the basis of verbal intertextuality, of descriptions in mythological or other literature — on condition that the description is applicable to the representation and can be considered to have been familiar to the artist and/or patron of the work. Thus St Joseph was portrayed not on the basis of a physical stereotype (as often in the case of Christ), but on the basis of the attributes of his trade, a description clearly based on what is written about him in the Gospels. 'The figure of Joseph appears in a wing beside the Annunciation as an artisan who fashions mousetraps' (Schapiro, 1945: 182).

Modern types, for instance racial stereotypes, may be fictitious in another sense and have their origin in other kinds of literature. Nederveen Pieterse shows how the physiognomic stereotyping of black people was still entirely absent from portrayals of black people by Rubens, van der Weyden, Rembrandt and others. Before these
stereotypes could enter into circulation they had to be constructed as meaningful signs, for instance in scientific writings such as those of Georges Cuvier (1769-1832), the Swiss scientist regarded as the founder of paleontology:

The Negro Race is confined to the south of mount Atlas; it is marked by a black complexion, crisped or woolly hair, compressed cranium, and a flat nose. The projection of the lower part of the face, and the thick lips, evidently approximate it to the monkey tribe; the hordes of which it consists have always remained in the most complete state of utter barbarism. (Quoted in Nederveen Pieterse, 1992: 42)

Such writing connected specific meanings to specific facial features (features which are of course not at all specific to black people). They were to be echoed in countless other places (cf., for example, Inké Mok's 1999 study of racism in Dutch geography textbooks between 1876 and 1992).

Iconographical symbolism

A first distinction which needs to be made here is that between abstract symbols (abstract shapes with symbolic values, for example the cross), and figurative symbols (represented people, places or things with symbolic value). Abstract symbols were common in the Middle Ages. The haloes which indicated sainthood, for instance, had several variants. There were haloes with a cross (reserved for Christ), triangular haloes (reserved for God) and square haloes (reserved for donors who wanted to be depicted among the saints). In the age of the logo, abstract symbols may yet again become increasingly important.

Figurative symbols are often seen as natural by contemporaries, as operating on the basis of transparent analogies with the natural world, rather than on the basis of conventions. In hindsight they may turn out to have been based on conventional ideas about nature, rather than on nature itself. In the Middle Ages Christ was often depicted as a lion. This seemed a perfectly natural symbol for the resurrection as it was believed that lions kill their cubs after birth and then revive them after three days. Scientific as well as popular racism may appeal to such analogies with the animal world. In late nineteenth-century America black people were called 'coons' because raccoons have large white eyes in a dark snout and are known as sly night creatures. 'Coon songs' popularized the analogy. Their sheet music covers were 'aggressively racist, showing black people with lips like watermelons, eyes like saucers, wild curly hair and elongated bodies' (Nederveen Pieterse, 1992: 135).

I will now turn to the textual and contextual arguments used in iconography for justifying the symbolic interpretations of represented people, places and things. The textual arguments identify visual 'pointers' which tell the viewers that a given motif should be interpreted symbolically. Following Hermeren (1969), four kinds can be distinguished:

1. The symbolic motif is represented with more than normal care and detail compared to similar works, or it is given an especially conspicuous place in the
composition, or made extra conspicuous by lighting, contrasts in tone or colour, etc.
2. Someone in the picture points at the symbolic motif with an expressive gesture.
3. The symbolic motif seems out of place in the composition.
4. The presence of the symbolic motif somehow contravenes the laws of nature.

Here is an example of the third argument:

It seems strange that Jan van Eyck as well as Ghirlandaio should be so anxious to stress St Jerome’s liking for apples. In fact, the fruit looks out of place in the saint’s study and this suggests that a symbolic interpretation is called for, or at least likely. (Ingvar Bergström, quoted in Hermenen, 1969: 84)

And here is an example of the fourth argument, Jan van Eyck’s Madonna in a Church, as interpreted by Panofsky:

It seems to have escaped notice however, that in this painting by a master so renowned for his naturalism ... the sun shines from the North. There is in all Christendom no Gothic Church having a full-fledged cathedral choir with radiating chapels that would face the West and not the East. And if it is hazardous to accuse the most observant of painters – and also one of the most erudite – of a mistake in scale, it would be almost sacrilege to accuse him of a mistake as to the simplest law of nature and the most familiar of ecclesiastical customs. If he decided to reverse the laws of nature, he must have had a reason for doing so. And this reason is, simply, that the light he depicted was not intended by him to be the light of nature but the supernatural or ‘super-essential’ light which illumines the City of God, the Light Divine disguised as the light of day. With Jan van Eyck this light, though independent of the laws of astronomy, was subject to the laws of symbolism. (1953: 147)

Just to make sure, Jan van Eyck also included an inscription (cf. Panofsky, 1953: 148): ‘The Virgin Mary ... is more beautiful than the sun and above the whole order of the stars. Being compared with the [natural] light, she is found before it. She is the brightness of eternal light and the flawless mirror of God’s majesty.’

Contextual arguments for symbolic interpretations are of three kinds:

1. The symbolic motif occurs often in an artist’s oeuvre (or in a certain kind of art) without any obvious historical or natural explanation.
2. The symbolic motif is, to use Barthes’s words, ‘an accepted inducer of ideas’, a commonly used symbol (in a given period and/or kind of art).
3. There is documentary evidence that the artist intended the motif as a symbol, or, more generally, that he or she was interested in symbolic traditions.

Iconographers are aware of the fact that symbolic meanings may be intended to be understood only by a restricted audience of cognoscenti, or even be private. In such cases ‘allude’ and ‘suggest’ may be more appropriate terms than ‘symbolize’, as in this quote from Edgar Wind: ‘The allusions [to the four elements in Raphael’s “Stanza della Segnatura” are extremely remote and reveal the playfulness of a humanist mind which rejoices in making itself understood only to a select and erudite circle’ (1958: 76).
A key distinction in the work of Panofsky is the distinction between open symbolism and disguised symbolism. This distinction comes about with the rise of pictorial naturalism in the Renaissance. A motif is an open symbol of something when it is not represented naturalistically or when there is no naturalistic excuse for its presence in the image. It is a disguised symbol when it is represented naturalistically and when there can be both a naturalistic and a symbolic explanation for its presence in the image. In medieval painting, Panofsky explains, 'objects accepted and plainly recognisable as symbols could mingle with real buildings, plants or implements on the same level of reality — or, rather, unreality' (1953: 140). When painters wanted to represent the prophets of the Old Testament as witnesses to the Crucifixion, they simply placed them beneath the Cross and identified them with suitable attributes and scrolls. Later painters began to find such anachronisms unrealistic and disguised the prophets as statues. Again, in Grivelli’s ‘Madonna and Child enthroned with donor’ (Figure 5.4), the Christ Child holds up a rather large apple in a gesture, which is clearly meant to display the apple to the viewer, rather than to represent the preliminaries to eating it, and fruit also decorates the throne on which they sit. The more inconspicuous apple in Jan van Eyck’s ‘St Jerome in his study’ (Figure 5.5) could either be interpreted naturalistically (perhaps St Jerome liked apples) or as a symbol of ‘original sin’ (cf. the story of Adam and Eve), as was done, for instance, by Ingvar Bergström:

This summary of the importance of the theological idea of *medicina* gives us a clue to the understanding of the apothecary’s jar of ‘Tyrical’ represented in Jan van Eyck’s *St Jerome*, particularly when we consider it together with the apple placed on top of it. It has doubtless to be interpreted as a disguised symbol expressing the remedy against original sin, acquired sin, disease and death, which is Christ. (Quoted in Hermelen, 1969: 91)

In the case of ‘disguised symbols’, symbolism can be more easily denied. Deciding which motifs should be interpreted symbolically becomes more problematic and contestable, and the arguments will have to be mostly contextual, as can be seen in the following quote:

[In the Mérode altarpiece] it is not easy to determine just which of the objects other than the pot of lilies — and of course the pious books on the Virgin’s table — carry a determinable meaning. Several of them recur in an analogous context of other works, both by the Master himself and by others, and can thus be shown to conform to an established tradition. The laver and the basin have already been mentioned as an indoor substitute for the ‘fountain of gardens’ and ‘well of living waters’, one of the most frequent symbols of the Virgin’s purity. The lions on the armrests of her bench bring to mind the Throne of Solomon described in I Kings X, 18 ft., with its two lions ‘beside the steps’ and twelve ‘on the one side and on the other upon the six steps’... Other features, however, such as the fireplace with its screen and the two wall brackets... do not so readily lend themselves to a symbolical interpretation. (Panofsky, 1953: 143)

Contemporary art may disguise symbolism in another sense. When artists draw on unconscious inspiration rather than on consciously known symbolic traditions, symbolism will be repressed on a conscious level. When critics then nevertheless give
a symbolic interpretation of such works, the artists will often contest it. In the age of post-modernism a conscious use of symbols and intertextual references seems to have become more acceptable again.

I cannot do justice to the wide range of racist iconographical symbols discussed in Nederveen Pieterse. I have already touched on the iconographical significance of racist stereotypes such as 'thick lips' and the 'projected lower part of the
face' and on the figure of the 'dancing girl' and her 'kinky' hairstyle (Kornelia Kinks was a familiar figure in pre-war American advertising and had a 'peaked' hair style of this kind). I will now give one further example: fruit.

In discussing the iconographical significance of fruit in white representations of black people, Nederveen Pieterse uses many of the arguments we have just discussed, for instance references to literature such as this quote from Anthony Trollope's account of the West Indies in 1858:

[The West Indian Negro] is idle, unambitious as to worldly position, sensual and content with little. He lies under the mango-tree, and eats the luscious fruit in the sun. He sends his black urchin up for breakfast and behold the family table is spread. He pierces a coconu-
tnut and lo! there is the beverage. He lies on the grass surrounded by oranges, bananas and pine-apples. (Quoted in Nederveen Pieterse, 1992: 199)

Or the argument that fruit was commonly used as symbolic of the 'laziness' ('irresponsibility', etc.) of black people:

Fruit was the classic symbol of plenty, commonly used to denote the natural fertility of the tropics, and hence the 'natural laziness' of blacks. For the West Indies, pumpkins and melons were the common signifiers of tropical abundance. In American folklore blacks are beset by an uncontrollable desire for water-melons. It is one of the attributes of the child/savage image. The water-melon suggests sloth, gluttony, lack of self-control, childlike needs; additionally it may carry sexual overtones. Bananas and coconuts have also been associated with blacks. Again the connotation is tropical abundance; in addition, the banana is a classic phallic symbol. (Ibid.)
Figure 5.6 'In the good old summer time', American postcard, 1907.

Figure 5.7 American advertisement for grapefruit, 1930s.
In Figures 5.6–5.8, the deliberate ‘posedness’ of the people and the foregrounding of the fruit could be a further argument in favour of a symbolic interpretation.

Although I have analysed single images, it should be clear that iconographical analysis can be used, not only for revealing the history (and persistence) of such racist symbols, but also for quantitative studies, so that the approach described here could be usefully combined with that of Chapter 2.
Figure 5.9 Titian: 'Allegory of Prudence' (1569).

With the exception of the lighting in Jan van Eyck's 'Madonna in a church', most of my examples have been of what Barthes would call 'object-signs'. But aspects of the way in which people, places and things are represented and compositions ('combinations of artistic motifs') can also be interpreted as iconographical symbols. As Schapiro says: 'Meaning and artistic form are not easily separated in representations; some forms that appear to be conventions of a local or period style are not only aesthetic choices but also attributes of the represented objects' (1970: 37). He argues this in the context of interpreting the use of frontal and profile in medieval manuscript illustrations representing the story of Moses at the battle with the Amalekites. In earlier pictures Moses was represented frontally (as was usually done with Christ), with his
arms extended like the arms of Christ on the Cross. Here he 'pre-figured' Christ and all that Christ stands for. Later 'he is turned in profile, and the reference to the cross is thereby blocked or weakened. Moses becomes a part of the action, like the fighting soldiers who are also shown in profile' (1970: 40).

The earlier rendering of Moses as if turned towards us and with arms outstretched appears all the more clearly then as a specially accented form suited to the reading of the episode as a symbol... while the later profile pictures an action of which the significance is given in the simple denotation of the words of the Bible and calls for no deeper understanding as a symbol. (Schapiro, 1970: 40)

In a footnote Schapiro extends this to modern art:

In the painting of the later 19th and early 20th century, the starkly frontal face and the pairing of frontal and profile returned as elements of the strong expressionist trend, both in portraits and narrative themes. The frontal position in subjects of sorrow, death, jealousy, anxiety, panic and despair by Munch and Ensor is a means in portraying the person in distress, self-isolating and turned away from others - he cannot 'face' the world, it is also a means of engaging the viewer's attention to the subject's face as that of another and kindred self preoccupied with its own overpowering feelings and speaking out to the viewer. (1970: 61)

Iconological symbolism

In moving from iconographical to iconological symbolism we move from identifying accepted conventional meanings to interpretation. One such kind of interpretation interprets works on the basis of the biography of the author, as 'autobiographical' on a deep, not immediately manifest level. The following example from Panofsky clearly shows this move from identifying conventional symbols to autobiographical interpretation. The work is Titian's 'Allegory of prudence' (Figure 5.9). It uses conventional symbols which were well known to Titian's contemporaries. On the level of representational meaning we see, on the left, the profile of an old man facing left, in the centre a frontal portrait of a middle-aged man and on the right a profile of a younger man, facing right. The iconographical meaning of this is as follows:

'The three faces' typify three stages of human life (youth, maturity and old age), (and) symbolise the three modes or forms of time in general; past, present and future. We are further asked to connect these three modes or forms of time with the idea of prudence, or, more specifically, with the three psychological faculties in the combined exercise of which this virtue consists: memory, which remembers, and learns from, the past, intelligence which judges of, and acts in, the present, and foresight which anticipates, and provides for, or against, the future. (Panofsky, 1970: 184)

But Panofsky goes further. He notices the resemblance of the old man to a self-portrait of Titian, and discovers that Titian, at the time he produced the painting, was engaged in collecting moneys owed to him, and managed to persuade the Venetian authorities to award his annual stipend and tax exemption to his son Orazio. He then searches for, and finds evidence that the man in the centre indeed represents Orazio,
and the younger man on the right Titian’s adopted grandson Marcio Venellui, born in 1545 and hence 24 years old at the time. The painting is autobiographical. It represents an episode from Titian’s life, an episode in which Titian, an old man, takes measures to provide for the future of his son and grandson.

As Panofsky comments, iconological interpretation requires ‘something more than a familiarity with specific themes or concepts as transmitted through literary sources’. It requires ‘a mental faculty comparable to that of the diagnostician – a faculty which I cannot describe better than by the rather discredited term “synthetic intuition”, and which may be better developed in a talented layman than in an erudite scholar’ (1970: 64). But iconological interpretation is also necessarily based on a certain principle of integrative interpretation, whether it is autobiographical, psycho-analytical, theological, sociological or otherwise. Here is a different example, this time not ‘autobiographical’ but ‘philosophical’: Jean Seznec’s discussion of a miniature in a Copenhagen manuscript.

These small images have much to tell us on attentive examination. They betray the conviction which had begun to assert itself in the fourteenth century that man is the prisoner of the heavenly bodies, entirely at their mercy. But resistance to this is sometimes expressed as well. In one case we have the figure of a happy child, unconcernedly plucking flowers and paying no attention to the nine spheres which gravitate around him charged with their dread symbols. In their own way, these naive images raise the whole problem of necessity versus freedom of will. (Quoted in Hermene, 1969: 127)

But, however much such interpretations rest on ‘synthetic intuition’, the arguments used to justify them are similar to those used in iconographical analysis. Again, they may either be contextual, as in the case of Panofsky’s analysis of the ‘Allegory of prudence’ (intertextual comparison of portraits, background research into documents pertaining to Titian’s life and affairs, etc.), or textual, as in the example below, which draws an analogy between the structure of a work and the structure of a particular religious/philosophical interpretation of the subject-matter:

In [Michelangelo’s] Tomb of Julius, however, heaven and earth are no longer separated from each other. The four gigantic figures on the platform, placed as they are between the lower zone with the Slaves and Victories and the crowning group of the two angels carrying the hara with the Pope, serve as an intermediary between the terrestrial and the celestial spheres. Thanks to them, the apotheosis of the Pope appears, not as a sudden and miraculous transformation, but as a gradual and almost natural rise; in other words, not as a resurrection, in the sense of the Orthodox Christian dogma, but as an ascension in the sense of the Neoplatonic philosophy. (Panofsky, quoted in Hermene, 1969: 145)

Iconological analysis, then, draws together the iconographical symbols and stylistic features of an image or a representational tradition into a coherent interpretation which provides the ‘why’ behind the representations analysed. In the case of Nederven Pieterse this ‘why’ is clearly sociological and political:

The question that keeps arising is, what interests of whites are being served by these representations? This refers not only to measurable economic and political interests
but also to relations of a subtler nature in cultural, emotional and psychological spheres, and to the various ways in which these relations figure in the phenomenon of subordination. The key that unlocks these images is what whites have made of blacks and why. (1992: 10)

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, then, Barthian visual semiotics and iconography are particularly useful for investigating the representational ('denotative') and symbolic ('connotative') meanings of the people, places and things (including abstract 'things') included in different kinds of images. Both methods provide explicit arguments for determining whether represented elements such as poses and objects, and elements of style such as angle, focus and lighting, can be interpreted as symbolic, and for distinguishing between conventionally accepted forms of symbolism and broader 'iconological' interpretations. The main differences between the two methods lie first of all in their objects of study – art works of the past versus media images of the present. Hopefully the use of Nederveen Pieterse's history of white peoples' representations of black people has demonstrated that iconography can usefully be applied to the analysis of contemporary images as well. Another difference between the two methods is that Barthian visual semiotics remains restricted to textual arguments, at least insofar as its explicit conceptual apparatus is concerned, whereas iconography also uses arguments based on intertextual comparison and archival background research.

Both methods recognize that symbolism may be 'open', mingling 'objects accepted and plainly recognised as symbols with real buildings, plants or implements on the same level of reality – or rather unreality', as Panoński says (1953: 140), or 'disguised'. In Renaissance painting, the favoured object of study of iconography, increasing naturalism led to an interest in presenting symbols in the guise of reality. Barthes's favoured object of study was photography. Recognizing photographs, even documentary photographs, as (also) symbolic constructs, a quest in which Barthes was a pioneer, may well have played a small part in the decline of naturalism, along with the 'constructivist' power of the new digital technologies.

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