# 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 some-what 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 con-scious 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, curios-ity, 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
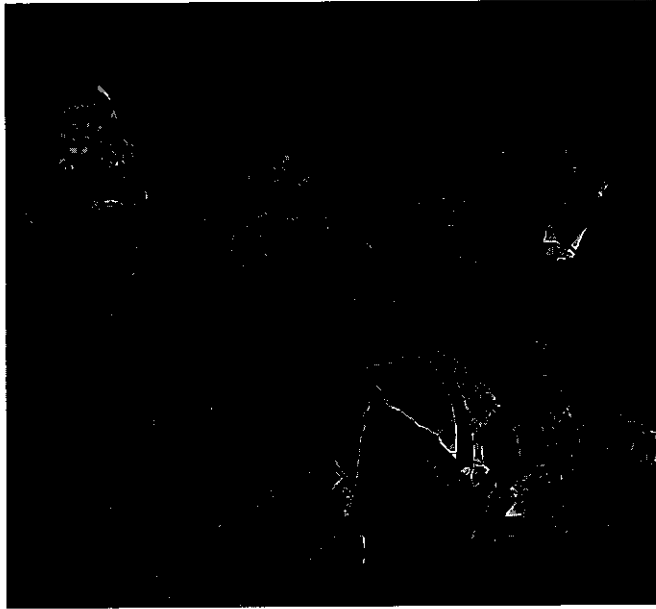
images are multiple, diverse, and complex. This image, of school children in the early 1940s who see a murder scene in the street, was taken by photographer Weegee (whose real name was Arthur Fellig). Weegee was known for his images of crimes and violence in the streets of New York, where he would listen 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
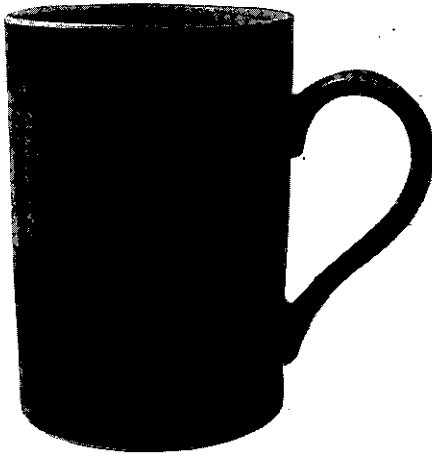
Van Gogh painting
on coffee mug

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.[1] 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.[2] 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
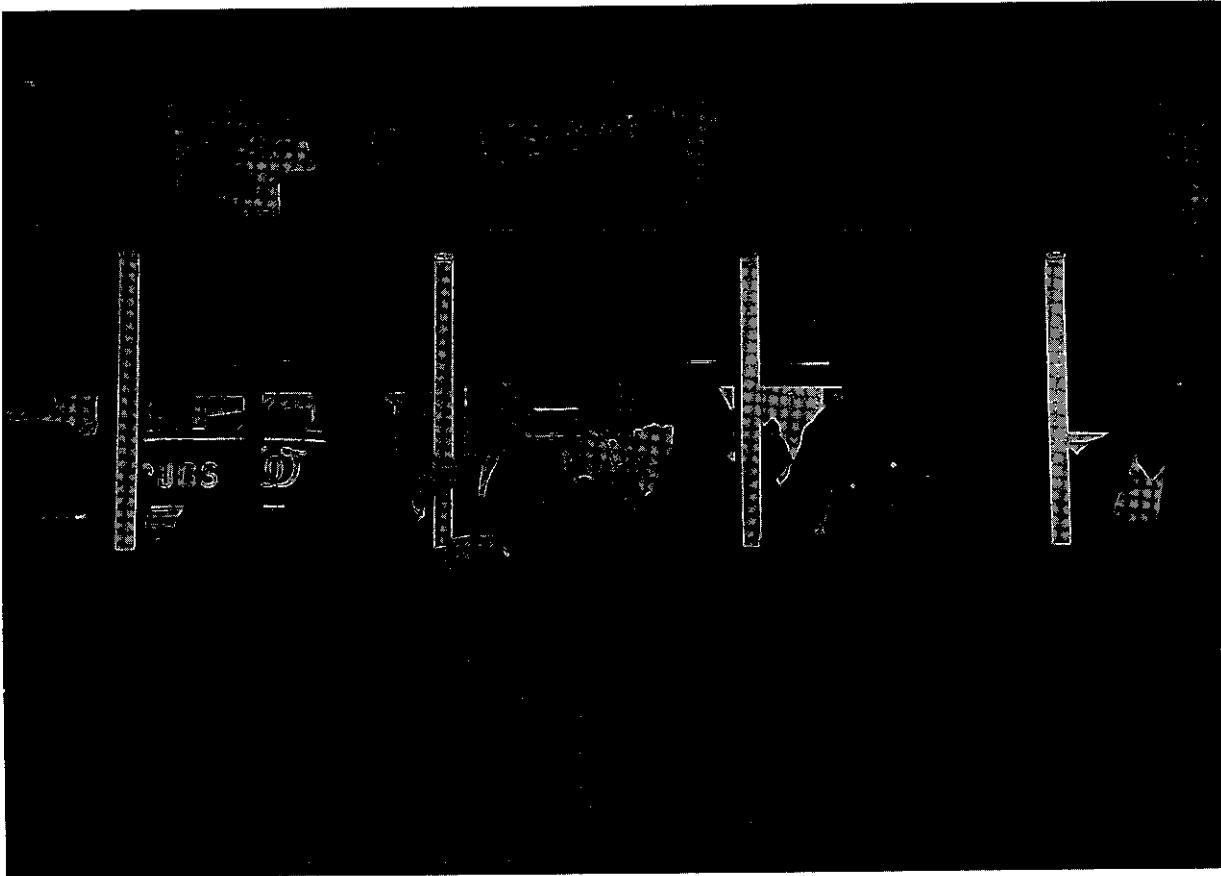
undergo radical changes in response to Civil Rights activism. The faces of the passengers each look outward with different expressions, responding in different ways to the journey. It is as if the trolley itself represents the passage of life, and the expressive faces of each passenger the way in which 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."[3] 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.
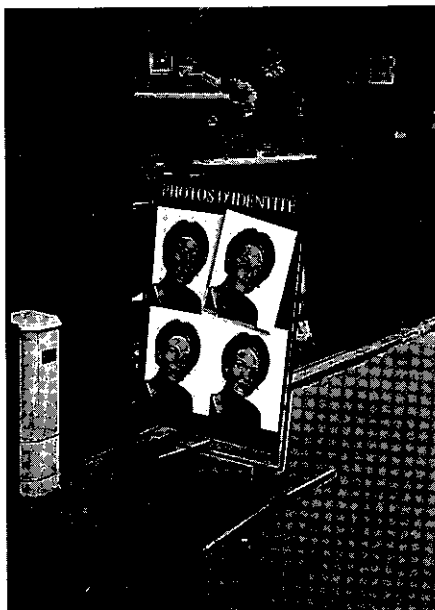
Images and ideology

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.
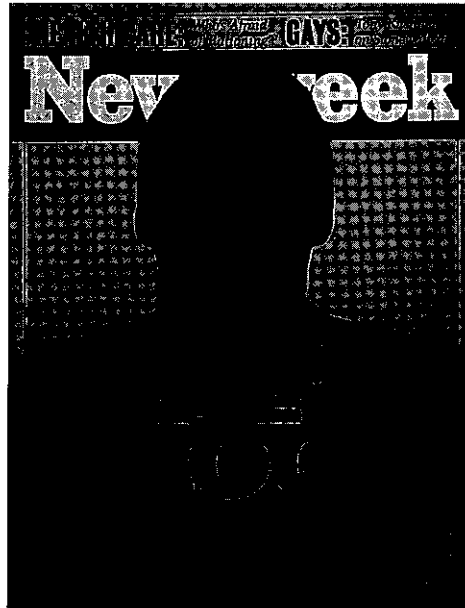
This happened in 1994, when the former football star O. J. Simpson was arrested as a suspect in a notorious murder case. Simpson's image had previously appeared only in sports media, advertising, and celebrity news media. He was rendered a different kind of public figure when his portrait, in the form 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.

we negotiate the meaning of images

The capacity of images to

s as viewers and consumers is dependent on the larger cultural mean-

y invoke and the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they

ed. Their meanings lie not within their image elements alone, but are

when they are "consumed," viewed, and interpreted. The meanings

mage are multiple; they are created each time it is viewed.

Learning use many tools to interpret images and create meanings with them, and

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
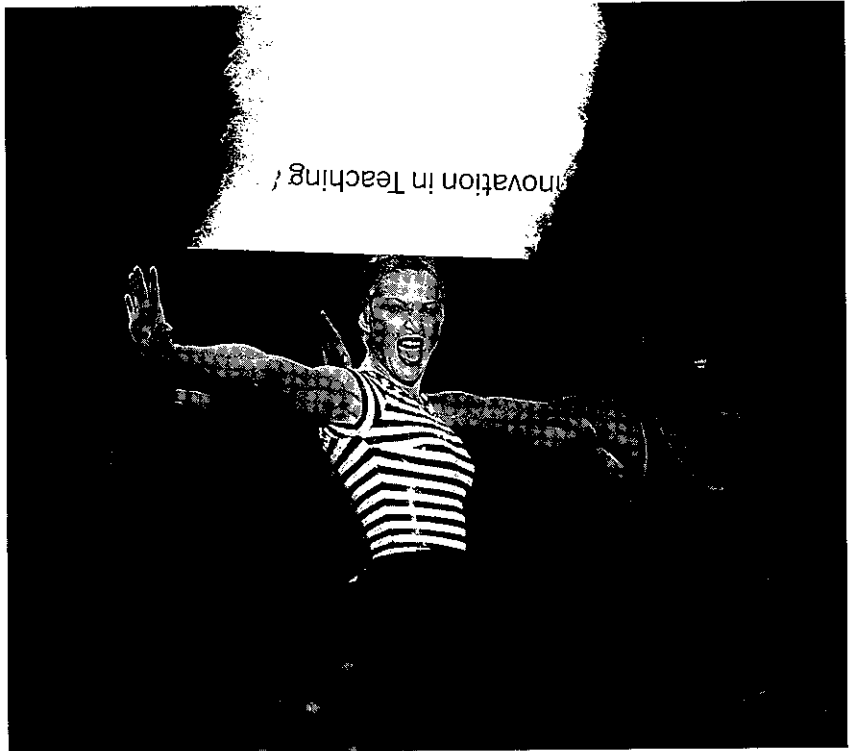
Madonna in one of her many identities

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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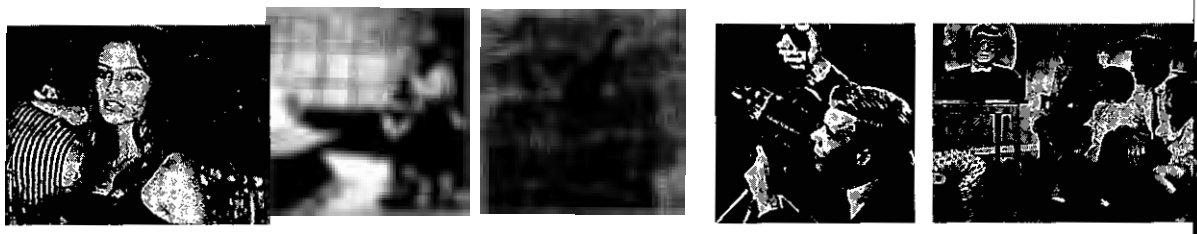
Practices
of Looking

An Introduction
to Visual Culture

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