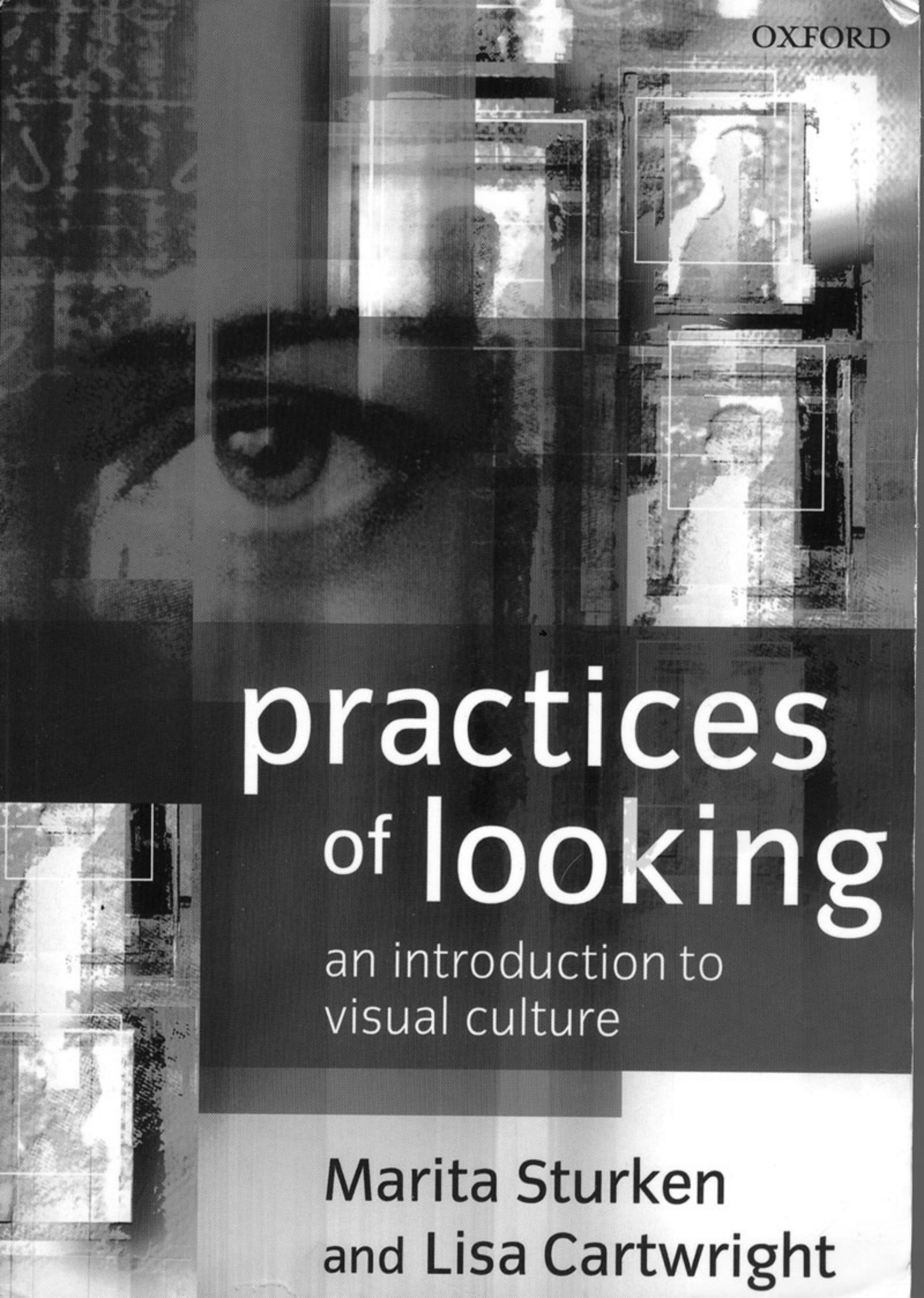


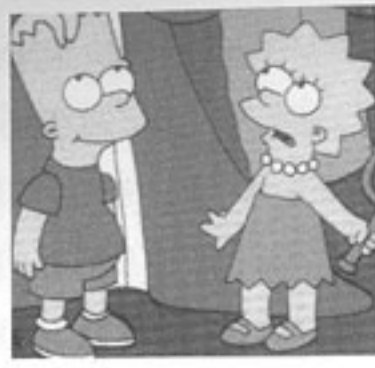
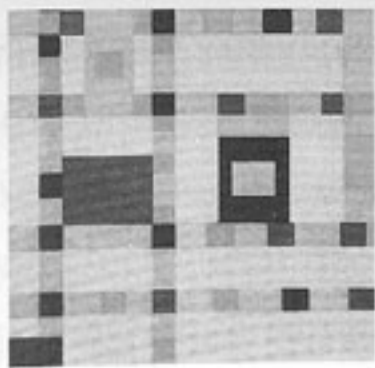
OXFORD



# practices of looking

an introduction to  
visual culture

**Marita Sturken  
and Lisa Cartwright**



## Postmodernism and Popular Culture 7

French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has described the late twentieth century as a period during which images became more real than the real. We have passed from an era in which *reproduction* and *representation* were the most crucial aspects of how images work. Regarding contemporary images, he writes, “if they fascinate us so much it is not because they are sites of the production of meaning and representation—this would not be new—it is on the contrary because they are sites of disappearance of meaning and representation, sites in which we are caught quite apart from any judgement of reality.”<sup>1</sup> For Baudrillard, one of the main theorists of the role of the image in the late twentieth century, *simulation* is the new image paradigm that replaces representation. We live in a culture dominated by the dull flickering screens of our computers and television sets, a culture in which America has become the paradigm for global looking practices ruled by the simulacra of virtual media images. Unlike representations, which make reference to a real, simulacra stand on their own without requiring recourse to real objects or worlds elsewhere. Within Baudrillard’s terms, the *hyperreal* overtakes the real, and simulacra rise, partly through new media forms, as the new forms of *postmodern* existence. Baudrillard is only one theorist of the looking and imaging practices of the late twentieth century that have come to be regarded as postmodern. But his ideas give us an immediate and dramatic sense of the role of the image as it is transformed through the new media forms of the period after the 1960s.

A wide array of styles can be found in the different images that have circulated since the last decades of the twentieth century. These images span from conventional ones that use traditional codes and genres to highly complex



ones designed to speak to media-savvy, visually literate viewers who are bored with the usual formulas. Contemporary image styles and products of popular culture thus represent many different approaches and ways of thinking about viewing. The terms “postmodern” and “postmodernism” have been used to describe some of the styles and approaches to making images that have circulated more prominently since the late 1970s. They have also been used to describe the set of *ideologies*, or the ethos of the late twentieth-century world in its particular phase of late *capitalism*, and with its high-powered technologies and media systems. This chapter considers the meaning of these terms, postmodern and postmodernism, with respect to art, popular media, and advertising of the last decades of the twentieth century and on to the twenty-first.

Is postmodernism a period, a style or set of styles, an ethos, a set of sensibilities, or a politics of cultural experience and production in which style and image predominate? Postmodernism, unlike *modernism*, has been such a mass cultural phenomenon that we probably all know something about it. In 1988 MTV launched *Postmodern TV*, a program whose title and context clues us in to the fact that postmodernism is at home with the very popular culture so criticized and disdained by many modernist cultural critics and producers. Postmodernism may not be about style alone, but style is one of the chief characteristics of a postmodern ethos. The term “postmodern” has been used to describe fashions, and was even used to describe those politicians in the 1990s who used the media quite heavily in their campaigns. It can be argued, along the lines suggested by Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra, that they used the media to produce something other than simply representations of themselves. They actually produced themselves through myriad media images and texts, generating identities as simulacra—hyperreal identities with no recourse back to a real person, their composite media image being more real than real. Whereas modernist art and theory were distinguished by their elitism toward media and the popular, postmodernism has been at one with the popular from its origins. Although postmodernism is not only style and image, it relies heavily on style and image to produce its worlds. In the period associated with late (post–World War II) modernist thinking and movements, critics spoke from positions they imagined to be outside—specifically, politically or aesthetically above—popular culture in order to criticize that culture, or to reveal the ideological investments hidden beneath the glitzy *surface* of representations and images. Postmodernism dispels the idea that *surface*

does not contain meaning in itself, or that structures lie beneath the mask of surface appearances. The modernist way of thinking about structure did not stop with the emergence of postmodernism; this approach to art, criticism, and theory continues throughout the 1980s and 1990s, overlapping with tendencies associated with the postmodern. One signpost of the difference between a modern and a postmodern critical sensibility is the acknowledgment within the latter that we cannot occupy a position outside of the milieu we analyze; we cannot get beneath the surface to find something more real or more true. As postmodern theorist Santiago Colás puts it, “We may attempt to forget or ignore mass culture, but it will neither forget nor ignore us.”<sup>2</sup> Postmodernism complicates the divisions between *high* and *low culture*, elite and mass consciousness, and in doing so makes it impossible to occupy a critical viewpoint on culture from outside or above it.

This attitude is not limited to criticism. It can be found even within advertising. We can identify a postmodern sensibility, for example, in those advertisements that give us a fragmented, cryptic set of images or story line followed by a brief and discrete logo on the screen, or tucked into the corner of the print ad image. No product, no mention of company name is needed for the viewer who is so thoroughly steeped in the world of media and consumption. Indeed, it would be an insult for manufacturers to think they needed the prompting of goods or direct *signifiers* of the company in an address to the consumer who lives its products as a part of his or her identity. Moreover, these advertisements need not sell their viewers on function or quality. They promote their goods as embodiments of style—style we can live by wearing or using these products. One of the aspects of postmodernism we are getting at here, then, is that it entails a reflexive recognition of our lived relation within the world of the simulacra. This is a world lived at the level of consumption, images, media, and the popular.

It is hard to identify a precise origin for postmodernism, though most critics associate it with the period after 1968. Opinions differ as to whether postmodernism is a period, a set of styles, or a broader set of politics and ideologies. Some theorists have used the term “postmodern” to describe the postwar “cultural logic of late capitalism,” a phrase famously used by cultural critic Fredric Jameson as the subtitle of his 1991 book on postmodernism.<sup>3</sup> This definition of postmodernism emphasizes the formative role of economic and political conditions including postwar *globalization*, the emergence of new information technologies, and the breakdown of the traditional nation-



state in the emergence of postmodern modes of cultural production. Others begin with the cultural objects themselves, identifying postmodernism as a set of styles—indeed, as a creative explosion of style and surface image in reaction to the rigid attention to form and underlying structure in modernism. The latter approach has been criticized for implying that postmodernism is simply a style an artist or producer might choose to embrace or reject, rather than a cultural trend that is integral to changes in culture, the economy, and politics. Postmodernism has often been characterized as a response to the conditions of late modernity linked to late capitalism. But it is widely agreed that there is no precise moment of rupture between the modern and the postmodern. Rather, postmodernism intersects with and permeates late modernity, a period during which modernist approaches continue to be generated. The proliferation of images and image-producing apparatuses like the cinema, video, and digital imaging devices that can be characterized as postmodern have been met by criticism steeped in modernist ways of thinking. At the same time, other writers have actively embraced a “postmodern” approach to cultural criticism. It is important to remember, then, that aspects of postmodernism and modernism have coexisted throughout and since the last decades of the twentieth century. One of the criticisms of some postmodern theory is that it does not take the historical into account. It is our perspective that to understand the terms of “postmodern” and “postmodernism,” we first need to consider what we mean by the terms “modern,” “modernism,” and “modernity,” and how postmodernism emerged from and exists alongside these concepts and this context.

## postmodernism

As we stated earlier, modernism and postmodernism both contrast and overlap with one another. There is no precise moment of transition between the modern and the postmodern, rather postmodernism intersects with and permeates late modernity. It is correct, then, to say that postmodernism describes a set of conditions and practices occurring in late modernity. Modernism and postmodernism are not concepts that are strictly period-specific. Aspects of postmodernism can be seen in the early twentieth century, and in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, aspects of modernity and postmodernism, as well as modern and postmodern styles, coexist.

The term “postmodernity” refers to the experience of living in a postmodern culture, and the upheaval of modernist principles and frameworks that involves. There are important social aspects of postmodernity that can be distinguished from those of modernity. Modernism was characterized by a sense of knowing that was forward-looking and positive, and believing one could know what was true and real as well as what was for the best in a given society. The postmodern is characterized by questioning these sorts of knowledges and the belief in progress: Do we really know that progress is always a good thing? Can we really know the human subject? How can any experience be pure or unmediated? How do we know what truth is? Whereas modernity was based on the idea that the truth can be discovered by accessing the right channels of knowledge, the postmodern is distinguished by the idea that there is not one but many truths and that the notion of pure truth is an illusion. As such, the postmodern entails a crisis of cultural authority, that is, a profound questioning of the very foundations of social structure and the means of theorizing social relations and culture.

For these reasons, postmodernism is often described as a questioning of the *master narratives* (or metanarratives) of society. A master narrative is a framework which purports to explain society, if not the world, in comprehensive terms, such as religion, science, Marxism, psychoanalysis, Enlightenment myths of progress, and other theories that intend to explain all facets of life.



Metanarratives involve a sense of an inevitable linear progress toward a particular goal—enlightenment, emancipation, self-knowledge, etc. French theorist Jean-François Lyotard characterized postmodern theory as profoundly skeptical of these metanarratives, their universalism, and the premise that they could define the human condition. Hence, postmodern theory has undertaken to examine philosophical concepts which were previously perceived to be beyond reproach or question, such as the idea of value, order, control, identity, or meaning itself. It has involved a scrutinizing of social institutions, such as the media, the university, the museum, medicine, and the law, in order to examine the assumptions under which they operate and the ways that power works within them. One could say that postmodernism's central goal is to put all assumptions under scrutiny in order to reveal the values that underlie all systems of thought, and thus to question the ideologies within them that are seen as natural. This means that the idea of *authenticity* is always in question in postmodernism.

One of the primary aspects of postmodernism is the critique of the idea of *presence*, a concept that is fundamental to the modern concept of the subject. Presence refers to an idea of immediate experience, the direct understanding of the world through one's senses and perceptions as both reliable and real. Postmodernism says that this idea of presence, or immediate experience, is a myth, and that everything we experience is mediated through language, images, social forces, etc. In other words, postmodernism asserts that there is no such thing as a pure, unmediated experience. The work of postmodern theory has been to examine these aspects of the postmodern condition and to make sense of the complexity of contemporary social interaction, meaning, and cultural production. This does not mean that all aspects of contemporary societies are postmodern, rather that they work in tension with modern aspects and other influences.

Postmodernism emphasizes ideas of pluralism and multiplicity. The idea of difference is central to postmodern thought. There is an emphasis in postmodernism on the concept of multiple subjectivities, that is, the concept that our identities consist of a variety of identity categories—race, gender, class, age—and are the product of our social relations to social institutions. This way of thinking about identity is quite different from the idea of the unified subject of modernity. Postmodernism thus has been contemporaneous with the focus on cultural pluralism and diversity. Postmodern thought has emerged simul-

taneously in dialogue with social movements of the late twentieth century that have brought to the table questions of gender, race, sexuality, and class: the civil rights, feminist, and gay rights movements. The concept of identity politics arose out of critical theories of the 1980s and 1990s that emphasized the cultural identity of authors and subjects as crucial aspects of the politics being articulated in texts. Following earlier forms of class, race, and gender-based theory including feminism, those authors working within the loose framework of identity politics brought to the fore the fundamental question of cultural difference and the question of who it is that speaks through a given text. It matters whether the subject being discussed, and the subject speaking, is male or female, black or white, Asian or Latino, gay, straight, or transgendered. In other words, these social and theoretical movements intervene in the idea that one can speak of the human subject in universal terms. With its emphasis on the differences between subjects, and by extension viewers/readers, postmodern criticism in a more general way emphasizes that images will be interpreted differently by different viewers. Some postmodern theory places an emphasis on the question of *polysemy*, the idea that texts can have many meanings.

It is not only criticism and theory that can be described as postmodern in its approach to its objects. Many postmodern image texts, be they television shows, films, or advertisements, have more than one preferred reading and may be interpreted by viewers in different ways. The idea of multiple meanings existing in one text is well illustrated in the example of *hypertext*. A concept used to describe computer texts with multiple links to various threads of a narrative or various points within a larger set of data, hypertext is emblematic of the postmodern condition in using a network model with multiple pathways rather than linear narrative to organize knowledge and information. Baudrillard introduced the concept of simulation to describe the collapse between counterfeit and real, original and copy that exists in the digitized culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It could also be argued that Disneyland's depiction of Main Street USA simulates a middle American street so convincingly that visitors may take their image of main-street America from Disneyland rather than from an actual small town.

Postmodernism has a very different analysis from modernism of popular culture, mass culture, and the surface world of images. While opposition to mass culture and its saturation of the world with images is one of the hallmarks



of modernism, postmodernism emphasizes *irony* and a sense of one's own involvement in low or popular culture. The forms of low, mass, or commercial culture so disdained by modernists are understood, in the context of postmodernism, as the inescapable conditions in and through which we generate our critical texts. *Appropriation, parody, nostalgic play, and reconfiguration of historical forms and images* are just some of the approaches used by some artists and critics of the 1980s and 1990s whose works are associated with the term "postmodernism."

## Reflexivity

Earlier, we discussed the conscious ways in which reflexivity emerged as a style in modernism. The practice of making viewers aware of the means of production by incorporating them into the content of the cultural product was often a feature of modernism. Much of postmodern art and culture takes this modern concept of reflexivity further. Self-awareness of one's inevitable immersion in everyday and popular culture has led some postmodern artists to produce works which reflexively examine their own position in relation to the artwork or the artwork's institutional context.

The early work of photographer Cindy Sherman is a good example of this approach. Sherman produced a series of photographs in which she struck poses evoking actresses in film stills. These images do not reproduce particular film stills. Rather, they evoke the style of a particular moment or genre, such as the Hollywood studio film of the 1930s and 1940s. A similar strategy was used by the Los Angeles Chicano art collective, Asco. This group made "No-Movies" comprised of film stills for movies they never actually made, never intended to make—because the group lacked the budget to produce one. This fact functioned as the instigation for an ironic joke about the function of the film still, an entity that requires no *referent* or "real" film to exist. It is well known in the industry that these stills are not frame enlargements from the actual film, but publicity stills—photographs made to advertise the film in production to the press before the film is complete. Posed to look like the film itself, these images have no referent, as the film is most often not even complete at the time the still is shot.

Sherman's photographs can be seen as self-portraits that are not actually about herself, since she is always disguised and playing a role. Hence, viewers are not meant to understand these pictures as images of Sherman or of actual



film stills, but as ironic readings, deliberate imitations, and self-conscious interpretations of style, gesture, and stereotypes. Sherman's work is a response to an era of feminist modernist criticism that challenged representations of women, an era whose defining essay was that watershed in feminist film theory, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". In this 1975 essay, which we discussed in Chapter 3, Laura Mulvey argued that in classical Hollywood cinema the male position is the active viewing position, while the female position is that of the passive object of male visual pleasure. This argument launched a whole field of feminist theory about structures of identification. Feminist film critics asked some of the following questions throughout the 1980s: How do Hollywood films, as one expression of patriarchal culture, organize our looking practices in ways that render the male viewing position one of authority and pleasure, and the female position that of specular object? How do women, as objects within this gaze, identify within a position of active

Cindy Sherman  
Film Still #21, 1975



looking? If woman is image and man the bearer of the look, can women assume a male looking position? If we use Freud's theories of subject formation in relation to language and meaning to assert the masculine nature of image production, where do women stand in relation to the subjective experience of looking and making meaning of images of women?

Sherman's photography indirectly but powerfully engages these theories of looking and sexual difference by giving us visual texts that comment reflexively on women's place on both sides of the camera, as bearer of the look and as image. Indeed, many of Sherman's earliest photographs show her dressed in the garb of the height of the Hollywood studio era (the 1930s and 1940s). Her compositions reflexively pose questions about spectatorship, identification, the female body image, and the appropriation of the gaze by the woman photographer as self-portrait subject. But Sherman, unlike critical writers, actively inserts herself into the media she reflexively critiques. Rather than taking a critical stance from outside the image and its mode of production, Sherman inserts herself not only into the image but into the process of its production. She enmeshes herself in the very world being critically interrogated in her work. This is one of the key things that distinguishes her commentary as postmodernist against the modernist critical-readings-from-above offered by feminist film criticism of roughly the same period.

Nostalgic references to other historical periods is another hallmark of postmodern art captured in Sherman's photographs. Like much postmodern advertising and media culture of the 1980s and 1990s, Sherman's photographs feed our nostalgia for bygone eras. Her double position as both producer of the scene and object of the gaze, however, introduces an edge of irony and reflexivity that sets her work apart from its more popular counterparts (Madonna, for example, as we will explain further). Irony refers to a deliberate contradiction between the literal meaning of something and its intended meaning (which can be the opposite of the literal meaning). Irony can border on sarcasm—that is, when someone says “nice picture” when they really mean “terrible picture.” In a broader sense, irony can be seen as a context where appearance and reality are in conflict. Sherman's photographs comment not only on the conditions of that past, but ironically on the artist-producer's awareness of her enmeshment in the visual culture of nostalgic fantasy she evokes. By situating herself as both artist and subject, Sherman invites us to think reflexively about subjectivity and gendered processes of

identification, cultural memory, and fantasy in postmodern visual culture. This makes her photographs ironic images that also instruct us in seeing practices of looking as historical and situated.

Reflexive attention to self-image and the cultural producer's own engagement in media culture is also apparent, with varying degrees of irony, in the construction of public image by various pop performers. Punk and New Wave artists of the late 1970s and early 1980s raided thrift stores to acquire clothes reflecting the various musical and artistic styles referenced in their works. Clothing and music were venues for parodic send-ups of the values of the Hollywood studio era and its culmination in youth rebellion in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1980s, cultural producers became obsessed with the transformation of self-image as a means of critical expression.

This strategy of appropriation and parody of fashion was popularized by Madonna, who adopted a Marilyn Monroe look, followed by numerous transformations of style and image over the course of her career. Madonna can be described as the quintessential postmodern pop figure of the 1980s and early 1990s in that she made the transformation of style a stylistic signature in itself. Sherman, too, appropriated the Marilyn look, but to a more insightful and critical end than Madonna's use of the image to capitalize on its mass appeal. Also in the 1980s, pop singer Michael Jackson exhibited a similar penchant for bodily transformation as a means of nostalgic reference to past icons, undergoing a series of surgeries and treatments to make his face over in the likeness of Elizabeth Taylor. These two vocal artists' construction of themselves as images, transforming their looks according to a familiar cultural referent, is emblematic of postmodern culture.

This focus on image was followed in the 1990s by artists adopting a more direct approach to the transformation of image and/as identity. Ru Paul, for example, made overt transgendered performance his trademark. French performance artist Orlan underwent a series of cosmetic surgeries performed by plastic surgeons in art galleries with the public present, resculpting her face after well-known female figures in various masterpiece paintings including the *Mona Lisa* and Botticelli's *Venus*. In the case of Orlan's surgical performances, the concept of nostalgia is important, but a more crucial factor (one might say fantasy) is that body and identity become infinitely malleable in a culture where the image is the ultimate register of experience. Orlan's work suggests that there is no “real,” original body to which we might return in our quest to model



ourselves after some fantasy of what we hope to become: the image of an image. In the modernist period the image's function as a register of truth and meaning came under scathing scrutiny. Postmodernism follows not by going beyond the image to some newer, more accurate register of truth, but by embracing the surface—the way that images supercede the real and the true. Postmodern theory sees the surface as the primary element of social life, as opposed to the idea that the true meaning is hidden underneath. According to Baudrillard, the surface is all we see and all we can have access to. The image transcends the idea of the real, taking on a new importance in millennial culture. We can no longer look below the surface for depth and true meaning, because we will find nothing there.

Reflexivity also takes the form in postmodern style of referencing context or framing in order to rethink the viewer's relationship to an image or narrative. One postmodern narrative style is to refuse viewers the opportunity to become absorbed in the narrative and lose themselves, to forget their role as viewers. This is sometimes done by breaking the conventions of cinematic storytelling, by pulling back the camera to reveal the framing devices or set, or by talking directly to the consumer about how the ad was made within the ad itself. Whereas within the modernist period critical writers asked us to pay attention to the framing and process of production of a work, in the postmodern period there is no implied criticism in this reflexive process.

Modernist reflexive narrative tactics involved asking viewers to notice the structure of the show and distance viewers from the surface pleasures of the text. This idea of distancing is an important one, because it means that viewers are engaged at a critically conscious level. Bertolt Brecht, a well-known German Marxist playwright and critic of the 1920s and 1930s, proposed the concept of distanciation as a technique for getting viewers to extract themselves from the narrative in order to see the means through which it gets us to buy into ideology. Reflexivity is, in this modernist light, a way that the critical viewer can undermine the illusions of a media complicit in the values of capitalism. Yet, in postmodern reflexive texts, it is the advertisers and media producers themselves who offer us these techniques of "disillusionment." However, they offer them as a pleasurable process, not necessarily as a tool for critical and distanced reflection on the real economic and cultural conditions behind the text.

Postmodern styles tend to break many of the conventions of image-making.

Films that incorporate postmodern style, for instance, defy the conventions of cinematic language by shuffling narrative elements and using jump cuts to call attention to the editing. Conventional cinematic language is based on a seamless text in which the illusion of a continuous story is created through specific editing techniques, lighting effects, and camera movements. Some postmodern films break these codes through the strategy of discontinuity. With discontinuity, the form is not invisible but, rather, is made obvious to the viewer. This can involve using jump cuts, mixing of black-and-white and color images, oblique or unexplained camera angles, or unmatched consecutive action. Since they were introduced in the early 1980s, music videos have often incorporated these strategies to tell stories in unconventional styles. Indeed, music videos are considered to be primary examples of postmodern style, with their mix of varied, often disconnected, story elements, their combinations of different kinds of images, and their status as both ads and television texts. It is an irony of media history that the techniques and conventions of discontinuity, reflexivity, narrative fragmentation, and multiplicity of meanings in a previous era were tied to the political project that aimed to get viewers to disengage from and oppose the capitalist media's illusionary images and looking practices. These techniques were meant to generate radical looking practices. Instead, they have become the codes of jaded viewers who are aware of the conditions of illusion and find nothing significant beneath them to ponder.

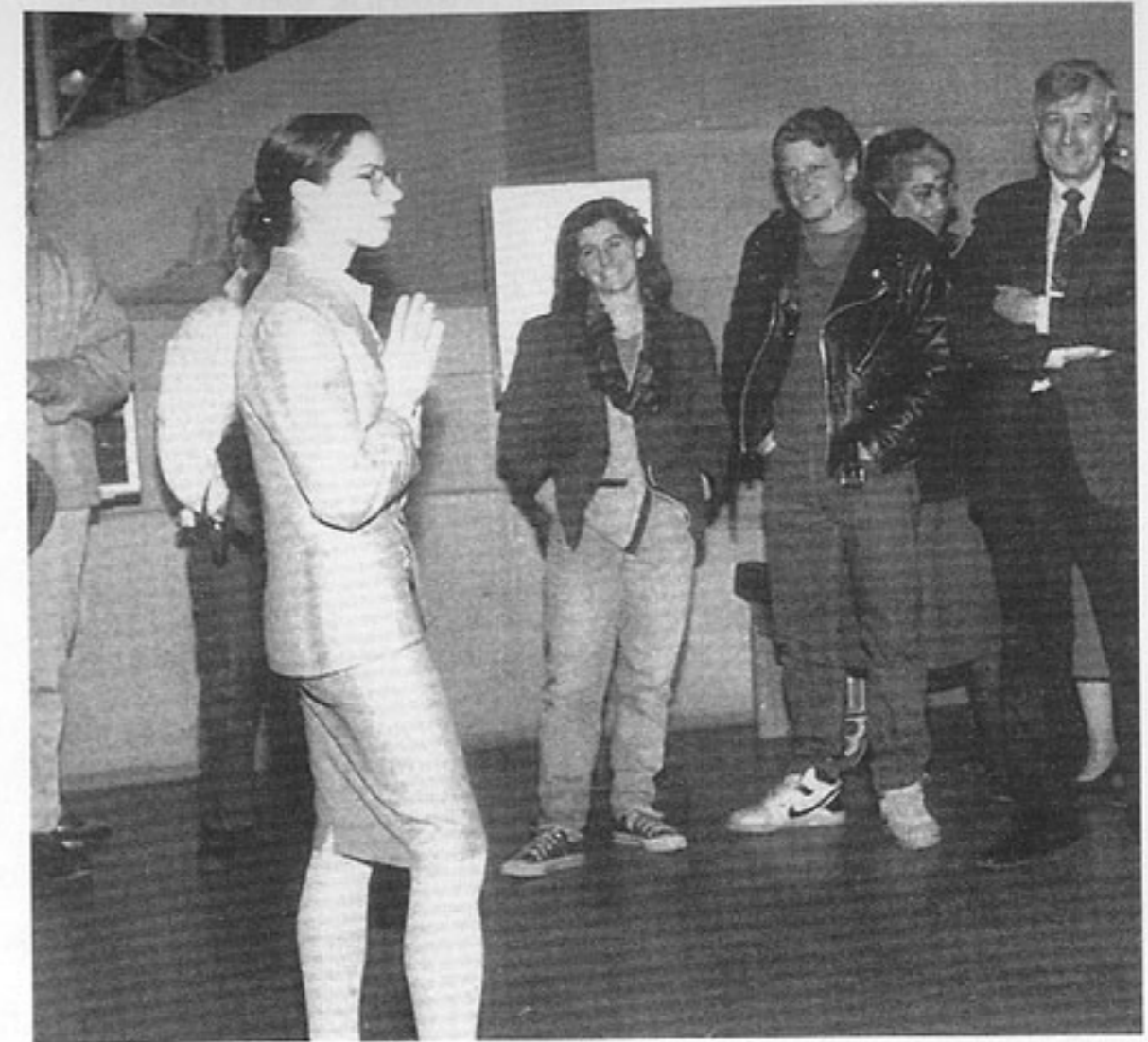
A film like *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), which tells its story in a non-chronological fashion with events taking place in a shuffled order, is an example of a postmodern text in the sense that it plays with the order of the narrative, making time a malleable entity. Each time that the story doubles back, the viewer is forced to think about the film's structure and to work to figure it out. Like discontinuous editing, this technique does not allow viewers to sink into any illusion of the cinematic narrative. But in this film, learning about the way continuous narratives give us an illusion of reality is simply a pleasurable exercise, not a political statement about the seductions of capitalist media.



### Popular culture: parody and reflexivity

Reflexivity is not only a feature of postmodern art, it has become a central aspect of postmodern style in popular culture and advertising. It often can take the form of noting the “frame” of the text—the set of a TV show or the border of an advertisement. In the ad on the next page, the torn page calls attention to the frame of the

Andrea Fraser  
performing *Museum  
Highlights: A Gallery Talk*,  
1989 at the Philadelphia  
Museum of Art



ad and acknowledges to the viewer the ad’s placement within a magazine, while at the same time using this device to illustrate doing “half the job.”

Reflexivity also takes the form of referencing other texts, be they other images, ads, films, or TV shows, through *intertextuality*. This literally means the insertion of another text, with its meaning, within a new text. One of the fundamental aspects of intertextuality is its presumption that the viewer knows the text that is being referenced. Intertextuality is not a new aspect of popular culture or specific to postmodernism. After all, the use of celebrities to sell products can be seen as an intertextual tactic—the stars bring to the ad the meaning of their fame and the roles they have played. However, contemporary intertextuality operates on a level that is much more ironic and complex. It often presumes a significant amount of media literacy and familiarity with many cultural products on the part of viewers. It *interpellates* a media and visually literate viewer who is familiar with image conventions and genres. For instance, in *Pulp Fiction*, John Travolta and Uma Thurman visit a restaurant where all the waiters are dressed as Hollywood icons: Marilyn Monroe, Buddy Holly, Jayne Mansfield. The drinks are named after famous comedy teams, such as a “Martin and Lewis” for Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, and an Ed Sullivan imitator runs a dance contest. Finally, the character played



by Travolta references his own previous film role in *Saturday Night Fever* in a dancing segment of the film. These intertextual references form a reworking of nostalgia that is both affectionate homage and a reconfiguration of history.

In advertising, intertextuality is a means to tap into consumers' memories of other ads, and to speak to consumers as savvy viewers. When Pepsi produced a series of ads with musician Ray Charles, the advertising agency inserted several jokes which made reference to previous Pepsi campaigns. In one scene, Charles, who is blind, takes a sip from a can that someone has switched from Pepsi to Coke. He then laughs and declares that he gets the joke. The joke of this ad refers back to previous advertising of the cola wars, when Pepsi and Coke would do "blind taste tests" with "consumers" in order to have them identify their brand.

Sometimes, intertextuality is deployed for the purpose of evoking nostalgia—the use of songs from the 1960s, for instance, to sell products in the 1990s. This kind of intertextuality can occasionally backfire when viewers feel strongly about the texts being referenced. In the 1980s, when Nike used the Beatles' song "Revolution" as the basis for a rapidly edited series of black-and-white images to sell its sneakers, there was an outcry among baby-boomer

Advertisements

One of the hotel's most beautiful young guests stopped lightly out the rear doors of the hotel and began her morning walk. His name was Danielle, and she was thinking of a party that had taken place earlier in the week. Having been caught walking hand in hand with her longtime friend, Richard, she had been sent by her father to spend some time at The Wardward Inn. Her expression was that of a woman whose relationship had ended too quickly.

He waved goodbye to her at the train station. She wandered down the small, winding path that cut through the hotel's jungle. A strange air of eerily lightness hauntingly. Dappled light filtered through the treetops spotlighting strange and magical-looking plants. Fantastically branching vines, creeping vines and flowers of every color of fire and flesh branched out wildly toward the pull of the sun. After waiting for a while and stopping to smell the fragrant flowers, Danielle began to feel a little odd.

Suddenly a beautiful white cat jumped out from behind a nearby bush and rubbed its gleaming fur against her leg. She was startled, but when she looked into the cat's eyes, she immediately felt a sense of familiarity. The way in which he held her arm, the way in which he held her arm, she suddenly made her want to cry with the memory of having found something long ago. The way in which he held her arm, she suddenly made her want to cry with the memory of Richard. Her eyes were closed and she was sent by her father to spend some time at the hotel's most beautiful young guests stopped lightly out the rear doors of the hotel and began her morning walk. His name was Danielle, and she was thinking of a party that had taken place earlier in the week. Having been caught walking hand in hand with her longtime friend, Richard, she had been sent by her father to spend some time at The Wardward Inn. Her expression was that of a woman whose relationship had ended too quickly.

Is your allergy medicine only doing half the job?

The leading allergy medicines may only take care of some of your symptoms. But that's just half the picture. **TYLENOL Allergy Sinus** has three powerful medicines. It not only takes care of your itchy and watery eyes, sneezing and runny nose, but also relieves the sinus pain, congestion and headache that often go along with allergies. For more complete relief.

**TYLENOL Allergy Sinus**

ALLERGY RELIEF CLEAR TO YOUR SINUSES.



Quentin Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction*, 1994  
© Miramax Films

consumers for whom the song had nostalgic value. Some listeners felt that the political message of the original song was being disrespected in this blatantly commercial appropriation of a song that had been something of a political anthem. Because this was the first time that a Beatles song had been used in an advertisement, the concern was that the political meaning of the word "revolution" had been reduced to the idea that there was a "revolution" in sneakers. This was, of course, nothing new, since advertisers have been using the word "revolution" for ages. However, the Beatles' song was explicitly about social upheaval. Hence, its use in an advertisement reminded consumers of how commercialized the 1960s image had become, and how stripped of authentic political meaning. This definitely worked against the preferred meaning of the ad—that Nike is hip to the ideals of the 1960s.

Increasingly advertising campaigns refer to other ad campaigns, either of competing products, generic campaign strategies, or as a co-campaign with another product. Not only do these ad campaigns disguise their status as ads, they actually work to emphasize this role. The Energizer bunny moves in and out of other ads, as a signifier of its slogan that it keeps "going and going," propelled by the Energizer battery. It is simultaneously an advertisement for the battery and a commentary on the nature of advertising itself. The bunny is usually used to poke fun at the pretensions of other ads at the same time that it is intended to capture viewers' attention by violating the conventions



of ads, interrupting the message so to speak. While the bunny acquires intertextual meaning which it carries into these other texts, the ad campaign also playfully remakes and parodies well-known texts. The irony of these references is increased by the longevity of the campaign, so that viewers now expect each new Energizer ad to up the ante of the last one. Like many postmodern texts, this ad manages to identify (one could even say “critique”) the very nature of advertising while still selling its product. This is typical of the double position occupied by many postmodern texts—it attempts to sell its product while simultaneously critiquing the process of doing so.

Ironic humor is a strategy used in many contemporary advertising campaigns. This ad for ABC is designed to capture viewer’s attention specifically through its ironic humor. It makes fun of the critical view of television through its message that “TV is good.” In doing so, it speaks to viewers, who are used to thinking of television watching as guilty pleasure, in an unexpected way. The yellow background of the image, with the computer text print simply displayed, has the effect of a yield sign, and echoes aspects of computer communication. The simplicity of the ad acts as a kind of deadpan statement, underscoring its message.



A parody assumes a viewer who is familiar with many different texts, and who will enjoy the activity of guessing references and getting the joke. It could be said that many of these parodies and intertextual references work on several levels, one for the all-knowing viewer and one for the viewer who may not know the references at hand. A television show like *The Simpsons*, which often remakes old films in its storylines, can work this way. When the show remade *Dracula*, it did so by incorporating particular plot elements of the film into its existing locale and characters. Not only that, it remade the Francis Ford Coppola version of the film, *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992), which was in turn a remake of the 1931 original. With many humorous and absurd plot lines, the episode of *The Simpsons*, pictured on the next page, did not ask viewers to take its reworking of the Dracula story seriously, merely to share in its homage and parody.

This returns us to the initial question, is it possible to make something new in a context of constant remakes, parodies, and references? Clearly, *The Simpsons’* parody of *Dracula* and other films is not a substitute for the original or an attempt to redo it. It depends on the original for its meaning. Its retelling of the story is always coded with irony precisely because viewers are never meant to be absorbed in the story without remembering that it is a remake. This form thus demands a self-consciousness on the part of viewers, in which they are constantly noting the form, style, genre, and conventions (and parodic departures from them) rather than the story itself. As we stated earlier, this does not constitute the kind of reflexive style deployed by modernists who wanted viewers to acquire a political distance from the message

Hello? It’s free.



Before TV, two world wars.  
After TV, zero.







The Simpsons, 1992

of a media work, but rather suggests a deliberately playful engagement with the idea of the forms of popular culture.

### Addressing the postmodern consumer

All of these stylistic strategies rework the relationship to the viewer/reader/consumer. Rather than thinking of viewers/consumers as dupes or as easily manipulated, these cultural products assume that viewers are media literate and a bit jaded by contemporary popular culture. They posit viewers who are informed about the conventions of popular culture, who know enough to understand intertextual references to other popular texts, and, in the case of advertisements, who are always potentially bored and ready to hit the remote control. Advertisements in particular tend increasingly to speak to consumers with a tone of knowing collusion. Advertisers address the consumer in a sly insider voice, a voice that says, “we know that you know how ads work and that you are not easily fooled. We are not going to condescend to you but rather are going to bring you into the process.” This is a form of *metacommunication*, in which the ad speaks to the

viewer as a postmodern strategy about the process of viewing the ad. It speaks not directly, but at a “meta” or reflexive level, in other words, the subject of the exchange (between viewer and the voice of the ad or text) is the relationship between the two. Hence, the ad is talking to the consumer not about buying the product, but about the process of looking at the ad. This technique allows advertisers to address jaded consumers in a new way and hence to get their attention. This metacommunication has the same goal as earlier forms of address in advertising—it is still about selling the product, brand, logo, or company image.

Metacommunication can be thought of as a postmodern strategy of addressing viewers/consumers, in that it appears to address viewers as more sophisticated and knowing. In always making reference to strategies of advertising, these ads appear to invite the viewer into the conference room of the advertising agency and to let them in on the secrets of the selling campaign. Yet, their actual goal is to get viewers’ attention long enough to create a *commodity sign* for their product.

In the 1992 ad on the next page, Kenneth Cole displays not a product but a handwritten memo which mocks typical fashion ads. This ad establishes metacommunication with the viewer by discussing the decisions that supposedly went into the ad. It is designed to allow the viewer/consumer to feel that designer Kenneth Cole is speaking directly to them. This technique interpellates consumers who understand the conventions of fashion ads and are presumably bored with them. The metacommunication of the ad captures the viewer’s attention but, most importantly, establishes Kenneth Cole shoes as hip, smart, and feminist. This is a company, the ad implies, that will not condescend to women consumers by showing them yet another image of air-brushed models wearing their goods. The handwritten note, which conveys a spontaneity and familiarity, thus aims to make the viewer/consumer feel they have a particular personal connection with the company.

Styles of metacommunication in advertisements often take the form of anti-ads. As we discussed in Chapter 6, these are ads in which the product is not shown, and the primary intent is to convey a sense of knowing or hipness. Often these ads use codes of *hyperrealism* to create this effect. The handwriting and askew angle of the Kenneth Cole memo makes it seem like a real memo lifted from the famous designer’s desk. A hyperreal text is one that seems to be saying “this is real, take note of that!” Realism is perceived in our culture to be authentic, of the highest value, and better than something constructed. In



**Kenneth Cole**  
NEW YORK

*We BRIEFLY Considered  
Running an 8 page Ad with  
Half-naked Models, shot  
by a Famous Photographer  
in some Exotic Location.*  
— **KENNETH Cole**

Footwear    Leathergoods    Handbags    Ties    Socks  
NEW YORK    AMSTERDAM    SAN FRANCISCO

Fig. 12. *Papaver somniferum* L.  
Opium poppy

Let it just be a flower!

STOP!  
DON'T USE  
OUR SEA  
AS A  
WC

...and us?

NO TO  
RACISM!

**MOSCHINO**

advertising, this strategy is in part a reaction against the increased slickness of ads and an attempt to make them look more spontaneous, intimate, and less artificial. This can be done through the use of grainy images, or in the case of TV ads, jerky hand-held camera movement, unexpected camera angles, "natural" sound, and the use of nonactors or out-takes.

In general, postmodern anti-ads discuss their products little if at all. Instead, they do the work of establishing a tone which will then be associated with their brand name. More often than not, this style is about establishing a product or brand name as hip or cool, or socially aware and concerned. This is meant to engage viewers by piquing their curiosity—to generate curiosity, as in, what is this ad about, and how can I get "in" on its exclusive world of meaning? This Moschino ad makes no reference to its product, but rather presents a series of political slogans. It works both to attach concepts of social concern to the name Moschino, and to get viewers to stop and examine the ad because it is unclear what it is selling. In this Diesel ad, the model selling the jeans is surrounded by strange men, all painted in gold, with no explanation. This campaign includes

many images of bizarre scenes designed to make Diesel stand out as cool and enigmatic. The campaign is intended to shock the viewer through images of the grotesque and the bizarre. This is a tactic used by advertisers to stop the "page traffic" of someone casually leafing through a magazine.

This strategy is taken further in many Benetton ads that do not show Benetton clothing or products. They consist instead of dramatic documentary images, or highly charged staged images that refer to social injustice, racial diversity, and global disaster. The only reference to Benetton is the logo set across each image. These images pictured on the next page are enigmatic. While the first two are clearly meant to signify racial harmony and the ways in which the races are tied (chained, handcuffed) together in life, the third is harder to decipher. This man seems to be a soldier in an unidentified war, perhaps in Africa. What kind of bone is he holding? Is this a war of both rudimentary and sophisticated weapons? A guerrilla war? Close-up framing is used in all of these images to withhold information, to create a sense of mystery, and to depict the sometimes claustrophobic spaces in which people of

**DIESEL**  
KWEAR

How to  
make Love  
pay.

GO FOR GOLD





different races are forced to engage with each other. The unexplained aspects of this image allow it to become a free-floating signifier, detached from the specifics of a particular situation. It refers to social strife and conflict only in an abstract sense. What, then, is the meaning that Benetton wants viewers/consumers to attach to their product? As we explained in Chapter 6, their advertising is marketing social concern in the context of global fashion.

Benetton is capitalizing in these ads on the importance of the photograph, in particular the documentary photograph, as an *indexical sign* that carries the cultural assumptions of photographic truth. These images are recoded when they are accompanied by a logo, yet Benetton deploys them without any contextual information, as a means of stopping page traffic, rather than as a means of informing consumers about particular conflicts or political contexts around the world.

Through this campaign and subsequent campaigns, including the use of disabled children to model clothing and a series on death-row inmates that included interviews, Benetton has achieved considerable notoriety. Indeed, precisely because of the difference of its ad campaigns, and its breaking of the codes of advertising, the company has been the subject of countless media articles. Its name is now approaching the brand recognition of Coca-Cola. Oliviero Toscani, the man who designs Benetton campaigns, has said, "My



dream is that some day Benetton won't have to spend another penny on advertising in newspapers or magazines." Both Toscani and Luciano Benetton have said that they felt that the codes of advertising had become too boring. Benetton states, "We felt obliged to get out of the traditional advertising formula. Of course, our advertising has to have a traditional function too—to make Benetton known around the world and to introduce the product to consumers. But for us just showing the product at this point is banal."<sup>7</sup> It is important to note the kind of blurring of boundaries indicated by such campaigns between the documentary and the advertising image. Not only does this rework the role played by the advertising image, but it also has an impact on the cultural status of the documentary image, given that it is so easily employed to sell mundane products. One could argue that in postmodern style, images are reduced to this kind of decontextualization and play, and stripped of their potential capacity to move and affect us in meaningful ways as viewers.

All of these ads engage in postmodern strategies that are about reinventing style and selling to media-saturated consumers. All of them acknowledge that showing the product to the consumer has become banal. For some advertisers, this fact means that ads must speak to consumers in reflexive tones, acknowledging the ad process. For others, such as Benetton, this means that ads should do another kind of work, such as addressing social issues. However, when such issues are raised in the context of an ad, whose primary goal is to sell a product or brand name, social concern is packaged and sold in a way that reduces its meaning. What then is the status of social concerns and political movements, when such statements are so easily coopted in the name of commerce? Does a political statement have any force when it is an integral part of an ad selling a product?

Postmodern style often raises such kinds of questions. Postmodernism addresses viewers as both complex readers and media and image conscious individuals. It is an ironic mode of viewing the complexities of contemporary culture. And, it is deeply cynical (in opposition to the uncynical aspects of modernism) about the level at which all facets of life appear to be commercial. Postmodernism is not necessarily liberating; just because it breaks with the tenets of modernism does not necessarily mean that it breaks with or is resistant to dominant ideology. Indeed, it can be seen as deeply implicated within the ideologies of consumer culture. In its rejection of nostalgia, universal humanism, and a single concept of truth, postmodernism is also about acknowledging the

overlap between the categories of art, commerce, news, and advertising. This means that there is both increased blurring of these boundaries as well as an acknowledgement that they were never as separate as imagined in modernism. Postmodernism signals the rise of a generalized self-consciousness, which can be seen in both the reflexivity and the metacommunication of postmodern style and in the constant questioning of traditional metanarratives in all facets of everyday life.

#### Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, translated by Paul Patton and Paul Foss. (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1988), 29.
2. Santiago Colás, *Postmodernity in Latin America: The Argentine Paradigm* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1994), ix.
3. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1991).
4. Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1993).
5. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Logic of Late Capitalism*, 39–45.
6. Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Unfinished Project," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, edited by Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), 4.
7. Ingrid Sischy, "Advertising Taboos: Talking to Luciano Benetton and Oliviero Toscani," *Interview* (April 1992), 69.

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