

ART & MASS MEDIA

Second Edition Revised

Betty Ann Brown

2005

Art & Mass Media: A Visual Literacy Text**Preface to the Second Edition**

In 1985, Robert Pelfrey wrote a revolutionary text that turned art historical practice from inward focus on the long-honored canon of masterworks to examination of how the visual language employed in such masterworks was related to the development of our mass media society. He pointed out that the artistic drive towards increased realism in Western culture brought forth new technologies, from linear perspective to the camera obscura to the photographic camera. In the last chapter of his book, he anticipated the explosion of computer-based image-making technologies that occurred in the last decades of the twentieth century.

I was thrilled to discover Pelfrey's book and happily used it for my Art Today classes at California State University Northridge because I realized he had written a text that accomplished what I had always endeavored to do in my lectures: relate the standard materials of art history to images and ideas from the students' lived experiences.

A Lot Has Changed Since 1985

But, as I said, Pelfrey wrote in 1985. Twenty years later, the relationship between art and mass media has been complicated by advances Pelfrey could not have anticipated. The Internet was not part of daily existence when he wrote. Boys did not spend their days fighting evil in video games. CGI (computer-generated imagery) did not dominate adventure films. College students didn't walk across campus with cell phones attached to their ears. And art museums didn't have interactive computer stations as common inclusions in exhibitions.

Changes in the materials Pelfrey addressed have not been limited to the remarkable expansion of technology in all of our lives. New and diverse interpretations of the materials have emerged as well. Artist David Hockney's book analyzing European painters' historic use of

proto-photographic devices, and the J. Paul Getty Museum exhibition “Devices of Wonder”--to cite but two of many important examples--have called increasingly attention to artist’s ongoing use of projective technologies to attain realism so prevalent in 15th through 19th centuries.

The discipline of art history has gone through fundamental changes in the last two decades. While many art historians continue to focus on what early modern critics called “disinterested” aesthetic issues, increasing numbers of scholars have turned to examination of the politics of representation. Instead of analyzing artworks as separate from social forces, they have begun to interrogate the impact of race, gender, class, sexuality and colonialism on art making. In asking how cultural context has affected and sometimes determined the nature of image production, they have revealed previously obscured aspects of art’s history and significance.

Although a lot has changed since 1985, the basic history Pelfrey developed and many of the basic concepts he introduced remain valid. This second edition builds on his 1985 book, adding to his original material in an effort to update it both conceptually and factually.

My goal in revising this text is surely what Pelfrey’s was in 1985: to offer students critical tools they can employ in their ongoing encounters with the highly visual mass media. In an effort to make the material as accessible as possible, I avoid many of the conventions of academic writing. For example, footnotes are only used to acknowledge direct quotations; I credit other sources mined for various ideas and interpretations within the text itself.

In this preface, I want to highlight those theorists whose works have shaped this writing most directly. While many of their names will reappear in the text, it is only here that I fully acknowledge their influence and summarize how their thought has contributed to visual literacy, that is, the critical study of art and popular culture images.

Media Theories: McLuhan

Canadian literature professor Marshall McLuhan began his pioneering media studies in the middle of the twentieth century. He sought to understand the way new media affect human perceptions. He wrote, “New [communication] environments reset our sensory thresholds. Those, in turn, alter our outlook and expectations.”¹ He also discussed the function of art: “Any artistic endeavor includes the preparing of an environment for human attention. A poem or a painting is in every sense a teaching machine for the training of perception and judgment.”² McLuhan viewed the artist as “the person who invents the means to bridge between biological inheritance and the environments created by technological innovation,”³ that is, as the person who translates the world in terms of new technological or media advances.

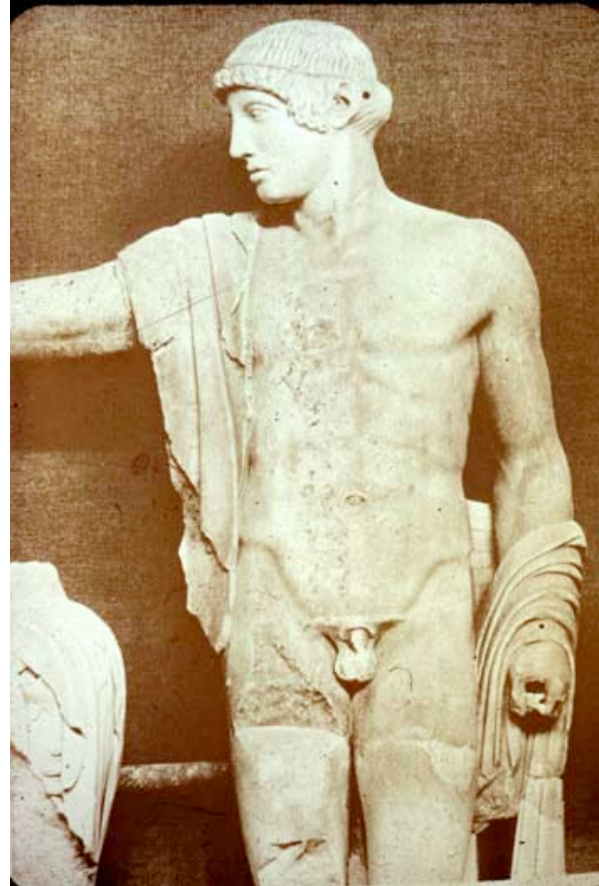
McLuhan analyzed the historical development of communication forms, from oral and pictographic, through manuscript, print, and electronic media. He began with preliterate societies, noting: “In a preliterate society art serves as a means of merging the individual and the environment, not as a means of training perception of the environment.”⁴ In this text, I concur, arguing that what is called “native art” often serves to ritually connect viewer/participants with the supernatural realm of the afterlife and the divine.

McLuhan discussed pictographic writing like the cuneiform of ancient Iraq, then the cultural shift from *making* to *matching* that is begun in ancient Greece and further developed in the Renaissance: “In the representation of reality stress is laid upon the visual sense usually at the expense of all the other senses. Such representation began with the rise of phonetic literacy and cannot occur at any time or at any place without the presence of a technology that favors the visual sense at the expense of all the other senses...When the visual sense is played up above the other senses, it creates a new kind of space and order that we often call ‘rational’ or pictorial

space and form.”⁵ You can see the differences between making and matching in art if you compare the image of a standing male figure from Ancient Sumer (P.1) with a standing male sculpture from Ancient Greece (P.2).



P.1 Sumerian Figures.



P.2 Apollo of Olympia.

McLuhan discussed the development of printing, then moved into the modern world. When speaking about the development of mass media, he asserted: “The content of any system or organization naturally consists of the preceding system or organization, and in that degree the old environment acts as a control on the new...The new TV environment is an electronic circuit that takes as its content the earlier environment, the photograph and the movie in particular.”⁶ McLuhan called the contemporary advertising world “a magical environment constructed to maintain the economy, not to increase human awareness.” He added, “We have designed schools as antienvironments to develop the perception and judgment of the printed word, but we have not

provided training to develop similar perception and judgment of any of the new environments created by electronic circuitry.”⁷ This text can be seen as an attempt to correct the absence McLuhan observed.

John Berger’s “Ways of Seeing”

In 1972, British art historian John Berger published a small, richly illustrated book inspired by his four-part British Broadcasting Company (BBC) television series *Ways of Seeing*. Asserting that “an image is a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved—for a few moments or a few centuries. Every image embodies a *way of seeing*. Even a photograph,”⁸ Berger linked the language of the fine arts tradition of Western Culture with that of the mass media, particularly advertising (which, in his British way, he termed “publicity.”) In this text, I employ the art historical emphasis of Berger and, like him, also look at popular culture images from television, film and advertising.

Berger began his discussion by establishing the primacy of vision. “It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it.”⁹ Then he asserted that human sight is intelligent: “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.”¹⁰ He discussed perspective, as I do in Chapter 3, and photographic vision, covered here in Chapter 5.

Berger also analyzed the relationship between originals and reproductions, largely following a 1935 article by German critic Walter Benjamin, who wrote the first important study of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Benjamin argued that ancient art served a ritual function: artworks like the icons of saints over Christian altars and the Aztec sculpture Coatlicue (**P.3**, discussed in Chapter 1) were created to serve important roles in religious

ceremonies. Such original artworks had a kind of aura that was inherent in the direct experience of the art. In our mass media society, the experience of the artwork is distorted and diminished by multiple reproductions. “This surrender of the once vital and immanent is the inevitable legacy of instant access to the art object and, when it is mass (re)produced, its ‘aura’ is lost and the link with its observer diluted.”¹¹



P.3 Coatlicue.

As Berger noted, reproduction makes it “possible, even inevitable, that an image will be used for many different purposes and that the reproduced image, unlike an original work, can lend itself to them all.”¹² This is a vitally important point: Images deployed in this text to analyze gender relations, for example, might be used by other writers to discuss race or class issues. Or they might be addressed on purely formal terms.

Berger analyzed the difference in European depictions of men and women. In general, he asserted, men *act* and women *appear*. Men are urged to strive for power, which they exercise over others. A woman’s presence is intrinsic to her person; her sense of being is based on how she is appreciated by others. Berger investigated how man is presented as the surveyor and woman as the surveyed, through analysis of subjects in European paintings such as Susannah and the Elders (the Biblical tale of a group of elderly men who spy upon a young woman in the bath, **P. 4**) and The Judgment of Paris (the mythological story of a man who judges which woman is most beautiful, **P.5**). He concluded this part of his argument by asserting that “...the ‘ideal’



P.4 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susannah and the Elders*, 1610.



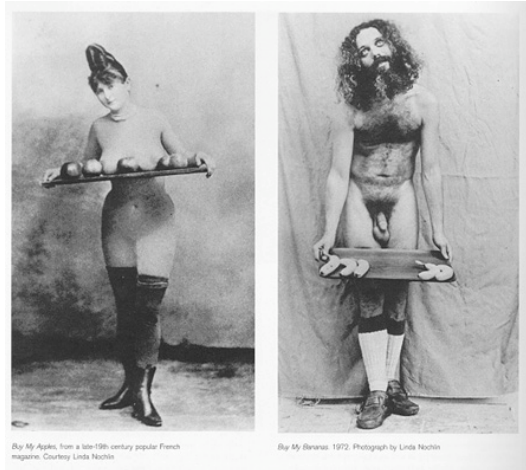
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P.5 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Judgment of Paris*, ca. 1600.

spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him.”¹³

He suggested that dubious readers try inverting the gender of a scantily clad female model in any ad, and experience the shock of “seeing” a man in the role of “object.” Art historian Linda Nochlin performed this exercise in her memorable

Buy Some Bananas (P.6) discussed in Chapter 5.



Buy My Apples, from a late-19th-century popular French magazine. Courtesy Linda Nochlin

Buy My Bananas, 1972. Photograph by Linda Nochlin

P.6 Anonymous (on left), *Buy My Apples*, no date and Linda Nochlin (on right), *Buy Some Bananas*, 1972.

After surveying the tradition of European oil painting, Berger drew a crucial distinction between such paintings and contemporary advertising images. Historically, oil paintings showed what the owner already possessed; they consolidated his sense of his own value. In contrast, ads make viewers dissatisfied with their present lives. Ads suggest that if the viewers buy the featured commodity, their lives will be better. Ads offer alternatives to what viewers are.

According to Berger, advertising “turns consumption into a substitute for democracy. The choice of what one eats (or wears or drives) takes the place of a significant political choice.”¹⁴ A 1990s television commercial for Wendy’s Hamburgers can be seen as an ironic depiction of Berger’s statement. The commercial enacts a parody of a Russian fashion show. For each category of clothing announced by the emcee—from swimwear to evening wear--the same model (a stout Russian woman) appears in exactly the same attire. The numbing sameness of Russian material culture is contrasted with the variety of choices offered the consumer of an American hamburger.

Berger’s book is a powerful assertion of the need to analyze our mass media environment. “In no other form of society in history has there been such a concentration of images, such a density of visual messages...we are now so accustomed to being addressed by these images that we scarcely notice their total impact.” He cautioned that advertising “adds up to a kind of philosophical system. It explains everything in its own terms. It interprets the world.”¹⁵

Berger used Surrealist painter Rene Magritte’s *The Key of Dreams* (P.7) to comment on the fluid relationship between language and vision, the “always present gap between words and seeing.”¹⁶ Both Magritte’s painting and Berger’s discussion were based on the linguistic work of Swiss theorist Ferdinand de Saussure.



P.7 Magritte, *The Key to Dreams*, 1930.

Ferdinand de Saussure: The Signified & the Signifier

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Saussure gave a series of seminars in Geneva that revolutionized the study of language and eventually affected all cultural studies. The published notes of Saussure's seminars have been described as "without doubt one of the most far-reaching works concerning the study of human cultural activities to have been published at any time since the Renaissance."¹⁷ Saussure urged his students to study the *structure* of languages, instead of the historical changes within and between linguistic systems. One of his most important points was that the relationship between a word (or "signifier") and the object or concept to which it refers (the "signified") is always culturally constructed, which is to say, always arbitrary. There is no "natural" connection between the word *pig* and the domesticated farm animal to which that single syllable is linked in English. In his seminars, Saussure initiated the parallel fields of semiology (the study of signs) and structuralism (the study of the relationship of cultural components within and between cultures).

Ferdinand de Saussure was tremendously influential on the anthropological studies of Claude Levi-Strauss. Instead of limiting his cultural studies to comparative descriptions or chronologies, the French anthropologist sought to uncover the way various cultural institutions were structured within a society. Levi-Strauss's ideas are also echoed in Berger's book. In a discussion about painting in the Western cultural tradition, Levi-Strauss asserted, "It is this avid and ambitious desire to take possession of the object for the benefit of the owner or even of the spectator which seems to me to constitute one of the outstandingly original features of the art of Western civilization."¹⁸ He added, "For Renaissance artists, painting was perhaps an instrument of knowledge but it was also an instrument of possession, and we must not forget, when we are dealing with Renaissance painting, that it was only possible because of the immense fortunes which were being amassed in Florence and elsewhere, and that rich Italian merchants looked

upon painters as agents, who allowed them to confirm their possession of all that was beautiful and desirable in the world. The pictures in a Florentine palace represented a kind of microcosm in which the proprietor, thanks to his artists, had recreated within easy reach and in as real a form as possible, all those features of the world to which he was attached.”¹⁹ (I come back to the concept of vision and possession in discussing Renaissance portraits in Chapter 3.)

Cixous & Derrida: Deconstructing Bipolar Opposition

Following Saussure, many cultural theorists have asserted that all cultural products from art to language to value systems are human constructions rather than “natural” forms. Many such cultural products are based on conceptual contrasts that might be termed *bipolar oppositions*. Several theorists have challenged the validity and universality of such oppositions.

Some of the greatest challenges have come from French philosophers Jacques Derrida and Helene Cixous. Both Derrida and Cixous were identified as outsiders, persecuted because of their Jewish heritage and stigmatized for their North African origins. Born in 1930 and 1938 respectively, both grew up during World War II. They began to examine the philosophical foundations that allowed the war and the Holocaust to occur. What could lead to such atrocities? They began to suspect that fixed structures in Western thought led some people to objectify and devalue others; such fixed conceptual categories may have led to the thinking that made the Holocaust possible. By the 1960s, both philosophers were analyzing the fixed structures of bipolar oppositions. While examining what bipolar oppositions were and how they played out, these philosophers began to dismantle such concepts in their writing and teaching.

(You can read Helen Cixous’ important 1975 article “Sorties” to see how she discusses bipolar oppositions. Here is how the article begins:

Sorties

Where is she?

Activity/passivity,
Sun/Moon,

Culture/Nature,
 Day/Night,
 Father/Mother,
 Head/heart,
 Intelligible/sensitive,

Logos/Pathos. Form, convex, step, advance, seed, progress. Matter, concave, ground -- which supports the step, receptacle. Man Woman Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it transports us, in all of its forms, wherever a discourse is organized. The same thread, or double tress leads us, whether we are reading or speaking, through literature, philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation, of reflection.

Thought has always worked by opposition,
 Speech/Writing

High/Low By dual, *hierarchized* 1_oppositions. Superior/Inferior. Myths, legends, books. Philosophical systems. Wherever an ordering intervenes, a law organizes the thinkable by (dual, irreconcilable; or mitigable, dialectical) oppositions. And all the couples of oppositions are *couples*. Does this mean something? Is the fact that logocentrism subjects thought -- all of the concepts, the codes, the values -- to a two-term system, related to 'the' couple man/woman?

Nature/History,
 Nature/Art,
 Nature/Mind...

I found the article on Questia, but it is available on lots of places on the Internet.)

As I will use the term in this text, a bipolar opposition is a pair of terms that have been historically linked in Western culture. The members of the pair have been considered absolutes, like white and black, with no gray in between. Some of the key bipolar oppositions are: male/female, self/other, culture/nature, good/evil, heaven/hell, and mind/body. Historically, while one member of the pair has been valued, the other has been devalued: white has been seen as good and pure, with black symbolizing evil. The privileged member of the pair has been constructed a primary and central; the devalued member has been marginalized. Further, the members of the pair have been seen in conflict.

(It is important to emphasize that bipolar oppositions are NOT universal. The yin/yang, for example, might appear to illustrate an ancient Chinese belief in the same structure, but the yin/yang depicts opposites that come together to achieve balance, harmony and completion, rather than conflict.)

The male/female pairing is considered “the primary opposition within western metaphysics.”²⁰ It was first narrativized in the Biblical accounts of Adam and Eve. The Greek philosopher Aristotle articulated the strict separation of the genders and the dominance of the male in passages like “...between male and female the former is by nature superior and ruler, the latter inferior and subject.”²¹ Centuries later, French philosopher Rene Descartes’ *Meditations* contained “a series of oppositions...as ‘metaphors of contrast’ that assert the primacy of the masculine over the feminine.”²² Simone de Beauvoir analyzed the long history of the male/female dichotomy in her immensely important book *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir argued that in Western culture, the male is central, the “norm,” while woman is marked as the “Other.”²³

The authors of the biblical book Genesis inscribed the culture/nature bipolar opposition as human domination of animals: “And God said, Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth on the earth.” (Genesis 1:26) Aristotle similarly asserted man’s dominion over animals when he wrote, “For it is better for them all [all animals, tame and wild] to be ruled by men.”²⁴ Today, the continuing impact of the culture/nature opposition can be seen in the Congressional debates about the conflicts between business (the culture of capitalism) and the environment.

The Bible is also a fundamental textual source for the origins of bipolar oppositions like good/evil and heaven/hell. Plato articulated binary thought in his ideal/actual, mind/body and form/matter oppositions. More recently, French feminist Julia Kristeva alerted us to the self/other opposition and its devastating political consequences.²⁵ Edward Said wrote about what he termed “Orientalism,” the way that Western cultural texts and images depict Near Easterners as immoral and uncivilized, in marked contrast to the upright and sophisticated Europeans.²⁶ Said was among

many cultural critics who felt that the self/other thinking of Orientalism was implicated in US wars with Iraq.

[Here is an excerpt from Said's *Orientalism*:

Everything they knew, more or less, about the Orient came from books written in the tradition of Orientalism, placed in its library of *idées reçues*; for them the Orient, like the fierce lion, was something to be encountered and dealt with to a certain extent *because* the texts made that Orient possible. Such an Orient was silent, available to Europe for the realization of projects that involved but were never directly responsible to the native inhabitants, and unable to resist the projects, images, or mere descriptions devised for it. Earlier I called such a relation between Western writing (and its consequences) and Oriental silence the result of and the sign of the West's great cultural strength, its will to power over the Orient. But there is another side to the strength, a side whose existence depends on the pressures of the Orientalist tradition and its textual attitude to the Orient; this side lives its own life, as books about fierce lions will do until lions can talk back. The perspective rarely drawn on by Napoleon and de Lesseps -- to take two among the many projectors who hatched plans for the Orient -- is the one that sees them carrying on in the dimensionless silence of the Orient mainly because the discourse of Orientalism, over and above the Orient's powerlessness to do anything about them, suffused their activity with meaning, intelligibility, and reality. The discourse of Orientalism and what made it possible -- in Napoleon's case, a West far more powerful militarily than the Orient -- gave them Orientals who could be described in such works as the *Description de l'Égypte* and an Orient that could be cut across as de Lesseps cut across Suez. Moreover, Orientalism gave them their success -- at least from their point of view, which had nothing to do with that of the Oriental. Success, in other words, had all the actual human interchange between Oriental and Westerner of the judge's 'said I to myself, said I' in *Trial by Jury*.

Once we begin to think of Orientalism as a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient, we will encounter few surprises. For if it is true that historians like Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt employ their narratives 'as a story of a particular kind', the same is also true of Orientalists who plotted Oriental history, character, and destiny for hundreds of years. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Orientalists became a more serious quantity, because by then the reaches of imaginative and actual geography had shrunk, because the Oriental-European relationship was determined by an unstoppable European expansion in search of markets, resources, and colonies, and finally, because Orientalism had accomplished its self-metamorphosis from a scholarly discourse to an imperial institution. Evidence of this metamorphosis is already apparent in what I have said of Napoleon, de Lesseps, Balfour, and Cromer. Their projects in the Orient are understandable on only the most rudimentary level as the efforts of men of vision and genius, heroes in Carlyle's sense. In fact Napoleon, de Lesseps, Cromer, and Balfour are far more regular, far less unusual, if we recall the schemata of d'Herbelot and Dante and add to them both a modernized, efficient engine (like the nineteenth-century European empire) and a positive twist: since one cannot ontologically obliterate the Orient (as d'Herbelot and Dante perhaps realized), one does have the means to capture it, treat it,

describe it, improve it, radically alter it.

The point I am trying to make here is that the transition from a merely textual apprehension, formulation, or definition of the Orient to the putting of all this into practice in the Orient did take place, and that Orientalism had much to do with that -- if I may use the word in a literal sense -- *preposterous* transition. So far as its strictly scholarly work was concerned (and I find the idea of strictly scholarly work as disinterested and abstract hard to understand: still, we can allow it intellectually), Orientalism did a great many things. During its great age in the nineteenth century it produced scholars; it increased the number of languages taught in the West and the quantity of manuscripts edited, translated, and commented on; in many cases, it provided the Orient with sympathetic European students, genuinely interested in such matters as Sanskrit grammar, Phoenician numismatics, and Arabic poetry. Yet -- and here we must be very clear -- Orientalism overrode the Orient. As a system of thought about the Orient, it always rose from the specifically human detail to the general transhuman one; an observation about a tenth-century Arab poet multiplied itself into a policy towards (and about) the Oriental mentality in Egypt, Iraq, or Arabia. Similarly a verse from the Koran would be considered the best evidence of an ineradicable Muslim sensuality. Orientalism assumed an unchanging Orient, absolutely different (the reasons change from epoch to epoch) from the West. And Orientalism, in its post-eighteenth-century form, could never revise itself. All this makes Cromer and Balfour, as observers and administrators of the Orient, inevitable.

The closeness between politics and Orientalism, or to put it more circumspectly, the great likelihood that ideas about the Orient drawn from Orientalism can be put to political use, is an important yet extremely sensitive truth. It raises questions about the predisposition towards innocence or guilt, scholarly disinterest or pressure-group complicity, in such fields as black or women's studies. It necessarily provokes unrest in one's conscience about cultural, racial, or historical generalizations, their uses, value, degree of objectivity, and fundamental intent. More than anything else, the political and cultural circumstances in which Western Orientalism has flourished draw attention to the debased position of the Orient or Oriental as an object of study.

You can read more about Orientalism at:
<http://www.wmich.edu/dialogues/texts/orientalism.htm>]

Post Structuralist thinkers like Derrida, Cixous and the other theorists mentioned in this section urge us to think beyond the stereotyping limitations of bipolar oppositions. Cixous cautions us about the violence embodied in the slash that separates the members of the pair. Derrida argues that there is a falsity inherent in all binary thought. He urges us to analyze and “deconstruct” the binary thinking that forms the foundation for so much Western thought.

American critic Craig Owens agrees, writing “The critique of binarism is sometimes dismissed as intellectual fashion; it is, however, an intellectual imperative, since the hierarchical

opposition of marked and unmarked terms...is the dominant form both of representing difference and justifying its subordination in our society. What we must learn, then, is how to conceive difference without opposition.”²⁷

Following the ideas of cultural critics like Derrida, Cixous and Owens about bipolar opposition or binarism, this text takes a largely deconstructivist approach. Among the critics who consider such an approach pertinent to the current historical period is Frederic Jameson.

Frederic Jameson: Marxism & Reification

Turning his critical eye to popular films as well as grand literature, and music videos as well as politics, Duke Literature Professor Frederic Jameson (b. 1934) has transcended the traditional intellectual focus on “high” or elite cultural manifestations. His more inclusive purview has allowed him to see similar conceptual processes operating in radically different cultural products. Jameson employs analysis based on Karl Marx’s theories to interpret how gender, race, class, and sexuality are constructed under capitalism. He particularly focuses on commodification and what Marx called reification, i.e., the transformation of a human or a human product into a thing.

Noting that “many of our older critical and evaluative categories no longer seem functional,”²⁸ James argues that “we must rethink the opposition high culture/mass culture...Such an approach demands that we read high and mass culture as objectively related and dialectically interdependent phenomena, as twin inseparable forms of the fission of aesthetic production under capitalism...”²⁹

Fine Art/Popular Art: Bipolar Oppositions in Western Views of What Art Is

Historically, one of the cultural products most often subject to bipolar opposition thinking has been art. Especially since the founding of art academies in seventeenth century Western

Europe, the term “fine art” has been used to distinguish what are considered “high” cultural productions from what are considered “low” cultural products. The focus in the French Royal Academy of Fine Art was on the “high” arts of drawing, painting and sculpture. Other art forms, like textile and ceramic work, were excluded. Even today, fabric and clay pieces are often called “crafts,” not arts. In the mid-nineteenth century, when photography was invented, there was furious debate about whether or not it was an art form; the debate remains unresolved in many people’s minds.

Art museums and galleries, as well as art history texts, have traditionally focused on the fine arts; popular arts like film and television have only recently been included. The breakdown between fine art/popular art categories can be observed in examples from the end of the twentieth century.

In the early 1960s, when a group of artists began to produce art based on mass media themes and subjects, the public was both shocked and amused. Andy Warhol’s *Marilyn Monroe* (1962, P.8) is an example of the emphasis on mass media subjects and themes, including a direct use of photographs and photographic processes by this movement, which became known as Pop Art.³⁰

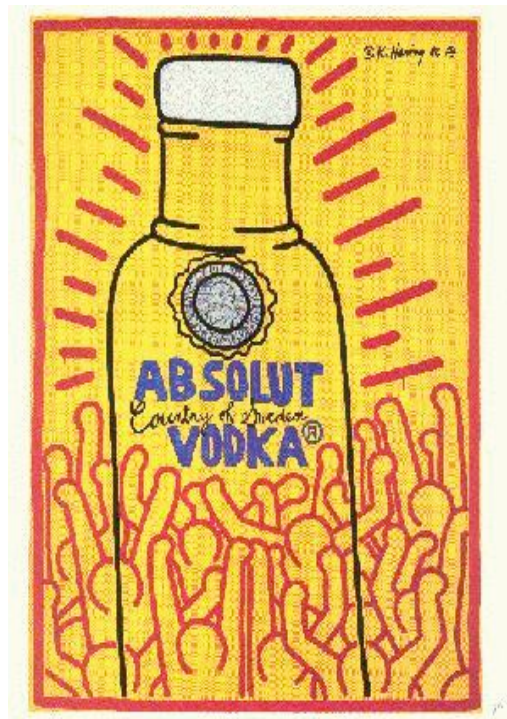


P.8 Warhol, *Marilyn Monroe*, 1962.

Pop Art works were disturbing when they first appeared because they inevitably raised the question, Is it art? Pop Art seemed to trivialize the traditional distinction between fine art and

popular art (the mass media arts of magazines, movies, and television). Once seen as challenges to the status of art, Pop Art images are today used for everything from tee shirts to coffee cups to Christmas cards.

Other challenges to the “high art” tradition have come from graffiti artists. By the 1980s, graffiti images--which had formerly been considered crude markings and illegal assaults on private property--were exhibited and discussed as art. The paintings of New York artist Keith Haring, which began as subway graffiti, were shown in fine art galleries in New York and Tokyo (P.9). A Haring image was used on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine and Absolut Vodka commissioned him to design one of their art-based ads.



P.9 Haring, *Absolut Haring*, 1986.

The end of the twentieth century witnessed widespread links between the mass media and



P.10 Chicago, *Dinner Party*, 1979.

huge glowing sheets of pink nylon (P. 11). Except for a small number of people in airplanes and boats, this work could be seen only on television or in magazine photographs. In this case, the mass media did not just provide publicity *for* the artwork, the mass media were integral parts *of* the artwork.

fine art. Feminist artist Judy Chicago's 1979 *Dinner Party*, for instance, used mass media publicity as an integral part of its purpose, celebrating and reclaiming the neglected history of women's cultural accomplishments (P. 10). Earth artist Christo's *Surrounded Islands* project encircled a dozen islands in Florida with



P.11 Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Surrounded Islands*, Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida, 1980-83.

bell hooks: Why Study Popular Culture

Cultural critic bell hooks' discussion about why she has moved from traditional critical material to writing and teaching about popular culture can help illuminate why some art historical studies, such as this one, have moved from focus on the standard canon of "high art" masterpieces to the inclusion of popular cultural images.³¹ hooks is convinced that students can understand theories of difference and otherness—theories like those discussed by Cixous, Derrida and Said-- when related to concrete examples from popular culture. When theoretical paradigms are presented in such a way, students seem to grasp them better, and to find them more exciting and more interesting.

hooks feels that the most enabling resource she can offer students is the capacity to think critically about their lives. She is convinced that students can enhance their lives by engaging in the critical process.

hooks has found that many people want to deny the direct link between representations and lived experiences. She knows the link isn't absolute: people don't see a movie and automatically go out and repeat the behavior they've seen. But seeing multiple images of, for example, violent sexual aggression, may make it seem more possible, more imaginable, perhaps even more "normal."

Representations *are* meaningful. And the media use certain representations for effect. As an example, hooks refers to the film *Smoke* (1995, US, Wayne Wang & Paul Auster). When she asked Wayne Wang why he chose to make the young thief in his movie African-American, especially given that there was no indication of race in the story from which the script was taken, Wang could not—or would not—say. He couldn't admit that he had reproduced certain racial stereotypes in order to make his images more compelling.

hooks points out that the only African-American actor in *Star Wars* (1977, US, George Lucas), James Earl Jones, was cast as the voice of the evil Darth Vader (**P. 12**). Thus, blackness was equated with evil in two ways: Vader's ominous costume was colored black and his villainous voice was that of a black man.



P.12 Darth Vader, from *Star Wars*.

hooks is convinced that nobody wants to lay claim to consciously constructing the images that perpetuate racism and other cultural inequities. Until challenged, neither the producers nor the consumers of popular culture images wants to accept that anyone consciously and deliberately reinscribes stereotyped representations.

What is the goal of cultural criticism? It's not freeing ourselves from representations; we can no more avoid mass media images than fish can avoid water.

According to bell hooks, the goal is to become enlightened witnesses when we view or “consume” representations, to become critically vigilant about both what is being shown, and how we respond. hooks does not support any form of censorship. Instead, she advocates a proactive sense of agency that requires of all of us a greater level of cultural literacy.

Literacy and freedom are connected. The degree of literacy determines how we see what we see, what it means for all of us. hooks urges us all to decolonize our minds to resist stereotyping representations and create new and exciting representations.

The goal of this book is to enhance the critical capacity of readers, as they continue to encounter images in every aspect of their lives.

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- ¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (New York, Basic Books, 1995) 349.
- ² McLuhan 339.
- ³ McLuhan 379.
- ⁴ McLuhan 343.
- ⁵ McLuhan 340.
- ⁶ McLuhan 341-42.
- ⁷ McLuhan 343.
- ⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Company and Penguin Books, 1972) 9-10. (Italics mine.)
- ⁹ Berger 7.
- ¹⁰ Berger 8.
- ¹¹ Nigel Wood, *Modern Criticism and Theory*, 2nd ed., David Lodge and Nigel Wood, eds. (Essex: Longman, 2000) 10.
- ¹² Berger 25.
- ¹³ Berger 64.
- ¹⁴ Berger 149.
- ¹⁵ Berger 129, 149.
- ¹⁶ Berger 6-7.
- ¹⁷ Roy Harris, quoted in Lodge and Wood 1.
- ¹⁸ Berger 84.
- ¹⁹ Berger 86.
- ²⁰ Linda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity & Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 18.
- ²¹ Aristotle, *A New Aristotle Reader*, J.L. Ackrill, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987) 513.
- ²² Nead 23
- ²³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1953).
- ²⁴ Note that Aristotle did not divide all of existence into bipolar oppositions. He also analyzed three-part structures, such as the soul, which he believed was divided into three registers.
- ²⁵ See Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
- ²⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978), excerpted in Lodge and Wood 271-86.
- ²⁷ Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others, Feminists and Postmodernism" *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster. Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983.
- ²⁸ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991) 64.
- ²⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 14.
- ³⁰ Writing at that time, Marshall McLuhan asserted, "Today what is called 'Pop Art' is the use of some object from our own daily environment as if it were antienvironmental. Pop Art serves to remind us, however, that we have fashioned for ourselves a world of artifacts and images that are intended not to train perception or awareness but to insist that we merge with them as the primitive man [sic] merges with his environment." McLuhan 343.
- ³¹ "bell hooks, Cultural Criticism & Transformation" Media Education Foundation Video, 1997. Many of these same points are discussed in hooks' *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*

(New York & London: Routledge, 1994).

Acknowledgments.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to Robert Pelfrey, whose original text inspired this second edition and is incorporated into every chapter.

I am similarly grateful to the many artists and scholars whose works form the basis for this analysis.

In addition, I am indebted to the following artists and art historians whose conversations along the way have helped make this book a reality: Jay Belloli, Ann Bray, Kenon Breazeale, Alex Donis, Owen Doonan, Cheryl Dullabaun, Samantha Fields, Joseph Forte, Peri Klemm, Anna Meliksettian, John O'Brien, Ken Marchionno, Van Markell, Milo Reice, Joey Santarromana, Karen Schifman, Susan Sifton, Victoria Vesna, Terry Wolverton, and Bruce Yonemoto.

I also thank the hundreds of students whose active participation in Art Today classes assisted me in shaping many of the ideas in this book. Their questions and comments directed me to further exploration of the images and issues analyzed here.

Finally, I thank my son, Wiley Brown-Burns, who not only read and commented on an early draft of this manuscript, but also did his best to keep his mother aware of contemporary popular culture developments. Indeed, it was watching the impact of the mass media on Wiley as I raised him that turned my art historical interest towards the complex relationship between art and mass media.

Betty Ann Brown, Ph.D.

December 2004

