For our class

2. Viewers Make Meaning
3. Spectatorship, Power and Knowledge
4. Reproduction and Visual Technologies
5. The Mass Media and the Public Square
6. Consumer Culture and the Manufacturing of Desire
Everyday we are in the practice of looking to make sense of the world around us.

To see is a process of observing and recognizing.

To look is to actively make meaning of that world.
Practices of Looking

- To look is an act of choice.
- Looking is a practice much like speaking or writing.
- Looking involves relationships of power.
- Looking can be easy or difficult, fun or unpleasant, harmless or dangerous.
- Looking can be conscious or unconscious.
- Looking is used to communicate, to influence and to be influenced.
A single image can serve a multitude of purposes, appear in a range of settings, and mean different things to different people.

This image, of school children in the early 1940s who see a murder scene in the street, was taken by Weegee.
Representation

- Representation refers to the use of language and images to create meaning about the world around us.
- These systems have rules and conventions about how to express and interpret meaning.
Representation

- Do systems of representation reflect the world as it is, as a form of *mimesis* or imitation, or do we construct the world around us through our use of the systems of representation?

- *Social constructionists* argue that systems of representation do not reflect an already existing reality so much as they organize, construct, and mediate our understanding of reality, emotion, and imagination.
Is this image simply a reflection of this particular scene or does it produce meanings about these objects?
Representation

- We learn the rules and conventions of the systems of representation within a given culture.
- Many artists have attempted to defy those rules and conventions and to push at the definitions of representation.
- Images such as this show the complexity of how words and images produce meaning in our world.

Rene Magritte, *The Treachery of Images*, 1928-29
The Myth of Photographic Truth

- The creation of an image through a camera lens always involves some degree of subjective choice through selection, framing, and personalization.

- Despite this, photography has historically been regarded as more objective than painting or drawing.

- The combination of the subjective and objective is a central argument about photographic images.
The Myth of Photographic Truth

All images have two levels of meaning:

The **denotative** meaning of the image refers to its literal descriptive meaning.

The **connotative** meanings rely on the cultural and historic context of the image and its viewers.

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**HOME**

Denotes a place where one resides

Connotes family, safety, love
The Myth of Photographic Truth

- The term *myth*, as used by Roland Barthes, refers to the cultural values and beliefs that are expressed through connotations parading as denotations.

- *Myth* is the hidden set of rules and conventions through which meanings, which are in reality specific to certain groups, are made to seem universal.
Images and Ideology

● All images are produced within dynamics of social power and ideology.

● Ideology is the shared set of values and beliefs through which individuals live out their complex relations to a range of social structures.

● Ideologies often appear to be natural or given aspects of everyday life.
Images and Ideology

- Ideologies are produced and affirmed through the social institutions in a given society, such as the family, education, medicine, the law, the government, and the entertainment industry, among others.

- Images are also used for regulation, categorization, identification, and evidence.

- Images often move across social arenas from documentary images to advertisements to amateur video to news images to art works.

- Each change in context produces a change in meaning.
How We Negotiate the Meaning of Images

- We *decode*, or read, complex images almost instantly, giving little thought to our process of decoding.

- We decode images by interpreting clues to intended, unintended, and even suggested meanings.

- These clues may be formal elements of the image, such as color, shade, and contrast, or the socio-historical context in which it is presented.
What does this image mean? When and where was it taken? What kind of event does it depict?
The Value of Images

- What gives an image social value?

- Images do not have value in and of themselves, they are awarded different kinds of value – monetary, social, and political – in particular social contexts.

- For example, in the art market, a painting gains its economic value through cultural determination concerning what society judges to be important in assessing works of art.
Vincent Van Gogh’s *Irises* sold for $53.8 million in 1991. Why is this painting worth so much?

*A Bold Bluff*, 1903, by C.M. Coolidge sold with another ‘dogs playing poker’ painting in 2005 for over $590,000.
Raphael, *The Small Cowper Madonna*, c. 1505

Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1936

How do each of these images represent different icons of motherhood?