



Viewers Make Meaning

it's not about the work itself.

Images generate meanings, yet the meanings of a work of art, a photograph, or a media text do not, strictly speaking, lie in the work itself, as if placed there by the image's producer for viewers to find. Rather, these meanings are produced through complex negotiations between viewers and image texts; they are shaped by the social practices through which images are interpreted, shared, and produced. This meaning production involves at least three elements besides the image itself and its producer: codes and conventions that structure the image, which cannot be separated from the image's content; viewers and how they interpret or experience the image; and exhibition and viewing context (which includes geographic and national location, time period, institutional setting, cultural and/or religious framework, and more). Although images may have dominant or primary meanings, viewers may interpret and use them in ways that do not conform to these meanings.

3 elements

Throughout this book, we use the term *viewer* rather than *audience*. A viewer is, in the most basic sense of the term, a person who looks. An audience is, by definition, a group of lookers/listeners; the term is often used to describe the consumer group that forms around a given commodity (viewers of a television show make up its audience, for example). In focusing on the concept of the viewer, we highlight an individual's activity, which we understand to be situated in a network of social practices. These practices are enacted not simply between individual human subjects who look and are looked at, but also among people, objects, and technologies in social places and spaces. Viewing, even for an individual subject, is a multimodal activity. The elements that come into play when we look include not only the images we are looking directly at but also other images with which they are displayed or published, our own bodies, other bodies, built and natural objects, technology and equipment, institutions, private or "natural" places, and the social

viewer
vs
audience

multi
modal
activity

practices and techniques through which we engage in looking. Viewing is a relational and social practice whether one looks in private or in public and whether the image is personal (a photograph of a loved one), technical (a medical image used for diagnosis in a hospital), or public (a work of photojournalism).

Interpellation is an important concept in our formulation of the viewer. To interpellate, in the traditional usage of this concept, is to interrupt a procedure or to question someone or something formally, as in a legal or governmental setting (in a parliamentary procedure, for example). In the 1970s, political and media theorists adapted the concept of interpellation to better describe the practices through which ideology operates. Ideology refers to the conscious and unconscious beliefs, feelings, and values shared in any given social group. Interpellation is one of numerous processes through which ideology is carried out.

To be interpellated is, quite simply, to be hailed or called in a way in which you recognize yourself to be the person intended by the call. Imagine that you are driving a car. You hear a siren wail behind you. The sound catches your attention, making you look into your rearview mirror, where you see spinning lights on a police car. You are “hailed” by the sound and image, recognizing yourself as the possible intended recipient of this audiovisual address meant to tell you “pull over.” You may feel personally implicated, even if you believe the address can’t possibly be meant for you (let’s say you weren’t speeding, you didn’t run a light). Hailed by the police car, you instantly recognize yourself as a subject of the (traffic) law of the state, even if you know you are not guilty of any legal infraction. In fact, you may feel interpellated (hailed) even if in fact the address was not intended for you—let’s say the police car pulls past you and pursues someone else. You still felt called out, for an instant. And if you are among the groups of people subject to racial profiling, you may feel interpellated in the sense of being targeted for no other reason than how you look. In this case, you are interpellated by the law, but your response may be not to “buy into” that ideology and imagine yourself to be guilty but rather to resist and recognize you are being subjected to an unjust visual logic—a racialized political ideology of appearances. But still, you felt yourself to be hailed, even if you didn’t like it or believe yourself to be the right addressee, or rightfully addressed.

The French political theorist Louis Althusser makes the point that “ideology interpellates individuals as subjects.” In our example, the ideology at play involves the law, specifically the traffic laws to which all drivers are subject. Althusser proposes that ideology’s structure is enacted through a visual system (we might also say a broadly sensory system that includes sounds, touch, and smell). In our example, sounds (the siren) and images (the emblems on the police car) and a logic of the gaze (the police officer looking at you through your rearview mirror) all interpellate you into the ideology of the law, whether or not you believed the implied accusation or message to be right or true. In Althusser’s theory of interpellation and ideology, looking practices are always fraught with power and may involve

ideology
beliefs
feelings
values

the process
of
interpellation

Interpellation = ideological calling / ideological address

It means that an image, sound, or message makes a person feel that it is specifically directed at them, and makes them see themselves as part of a certain situation or identity.

Example from the page: A police siren does not say your name, but it makes you feel that "you are the one being addressed or targeted"; this is an example of interpellation.

oppression, and our participation in them may involve tension around belief and resistance to the law. To be caught up in ideology does not always mean to share in a belief but rather more often entails being complexly caught up in its network of power relations. As we discuss further in Chapter 3, looking entails complex power relationships in which we may act, or may be made to act, in a variety of ways.

We use the term *interpellate*, then, to describe the way that images, sounds, and audiovisual media texts not only catch our attention but also enlist us into recognizing ourselves as the subject of an address by another within a system of power. Althusser explains that viewers "work by themselves" and don't need to be forced to look or listen when hailed by ideology. Images and sounds hail viewers at the level of the individual, even when each of us knows that many people will look at the same image and listen to the same sounds—that the image or sound is not intended "just for me" but reaches a wider audience, perhaps even a whole nation. This experience illustrates an interesting paradox around individual and group enlistment into ideology: for viewer interpellation by an image/sound to be effective, the viewer-listener must implicitly understand himself or herself to be a member of a social group that shares codes and conventions through which the image/sound becomes meaningful. I may feel that an image touches me personally, but it can do so only if I understand myself also to be a member of a group to whom its codes and conventions "speak" personally, even if the image does not "say" the same thing to me as it does to someone else. You may love to wear jeans and your social media may be filled with ads for them because of your previous online purchasing habits, but you do not have to like a particular brand to be interpellated by an advertisement for it that pops up in your feed, or to recognize that you are the intended recipient of the advertisement's address, despite your dislike for the particular brand. To be interpellated by an image is to know that that image is meant "for you," even if you know that you do not buy into the tastes, beliefs, or cultures it invokes, even as you have been targeted as part of its group.

Thus, being interpellated is not necessarily about believing in something; it may involve rejecting identification with the ideology in which one is nonetheless caught up, perhaps simply by feeling internally alienated by it, or perhaps by performing acts of resistance to its messages and culture. But whether we feel belonging within, exclusion from, or outright rejection of the hailing ideology, the concept of interpellation shows how we are shaped as social subjects through immersion in a context of ideologies, such as laws and the discourses that surround them. This is the case whether that ideology is the law of the state, brand culture, religion, politics, or any other cultural institution.

This U.S. Army recruiting poster created by the artist James Montgomery Flagg is a particularly direct example of the way in which images address and interpellate viewers, constituting them as ideological subjects. The poster was created in 1917 and then revived during World War II and became a work that the U.S. Library of Congress calls "the most popular personification of the United States."¹

Shaving X
to find
yourself

Part of
a
whole

For
you

interpellation
doesn't
mean
believing



FIG. 2.1

U.S. Army recruitment poster, 1917, from lithograph by James Montgomery Flagg

Uncle Sam's eyes look directly at the viewer, his pointing finger aligned with his piercing look. His image and words address both a collective national subject and an individual looker and listener: "I want YOU" to join your country's army. The "loud" YOU underlines the poster's address to the individual: the demand to join the army is made to not just any Americans, but to YOU, the individual who is caught in Uncle Sam's line of sight. It is hard to escape this poster's pointed address. The image has interpellated millions into recognition of themselves as individual subjects of the state singled out for action by that imperious finger.

Yet we must not assume that everyone who sees this image feels interpellated into an ideology of U.S. nationalism. It is possible to respond to this image by refusing interpellation, as a subject who is resistant to or incensed by the ideology of national militarism. Just like the subject who says "not

me!" in response to the police siren, so too we may be "enlisted" by ideology in ways that the image's producers did not intend, and we may act in ways that are counter to their intent. In his well-known

essay, "What Do Pictures Want?," W. J. T. Mitchell writes that this poster helps us to think about how pictures have a kind of agency and can make demands of viewers. Thus, according to Mitchell, we should ask, "What does this picture want?" rather than "What does it do?" This approach allows us to think about pictures as sites where desire and power are negotiated, rather than as sheer manipulation or propaganda.² This picture wants young men to enlist in the army and wants them to be willing to die for the nation, yet, as we note, the viewer may resist this demand.

When we talk about interpellation, the term *audience*, which is often used in communication and marketing analysis, is not a highly useful concept because it does not adequately capture interpellation's paradox in which collective address is made to feel personal. Even the most personal images work through this paradoxical process of being constituted as an individual through a process that speaks to many: I may be personally moved by a photograph, yet that photograph's address works through codes and conventions of "the personal" that are widely shared. Selfies taken with stars and politicians sometimes work this way, generating a sense of familiarity with everyday people who "hail" us as their peers even if we do not know them or share their appreciation of the familiar celebrity with whom they appear. For example, in a selfie taken by a fan with boxing champion Ronda Rousey, it is easy to feel the fan's sense of delight in being close to the admired icon, even as we know he has no true "personal" relationship with her (Rousey will assume the same intimate pose with many fans) and even if we care little about Rousey and women's boxing culture ourselves. As viewers of the image, we are interpellated into the "intimate" culture of the fan selfie.

Sam
Call



the
viewer
is the
subject

By focusing on the viewer throughout this book, we are emphasizing how images, sounds, and audiovisual media texts touch audience members through experiences of belonging, resistance, individual agency, and interpretive autonomy. Many twentieth-century critics of the culture industry saw the viewer as a figure duped by popular culture's mass-circulated images. We understand interpellation differently. To be interpellated or touched as an individual viewer is a common and unavoidable aspect of encountering images and media texts. Even if we are wise to the strategies of interpellation, and even if we dislike the message, we still get caught up. Yet individual human agency and desire are not wholly controlled by industry market experts; dominant meanings are not the only or the most important ones that we experience when we are interpellated by images and sounds. By considering viewers, rather than a generic concept of audiences (an abstraction to which marketers and program producers target their products), we may discern the many ways that viewers and listeners make meanings that go beyond producers' intentions. This is not to say that individual choice and taste are the dominant forces behind meaning making. Rather, viewer engagement with images and the field of looking are always shaped by context, which includes a range of factors such as culture, history, sexuality, class, national setting, and time period.



FIG. 2.2

Ronda Rousey, UFC Women's Bantamweight Champion, takes selfies with fans during the UFC 193 media event at Etihad Stadium, September 16, 2015, in Melbourne, Australia

Context is the King!

Producers' Intended Meanings

In the social media era, almost anyone with a mobile phone can produce images. Many of us are immersed in digital social media, browsing online throughout the day and sending, posting, and receiving text messages and images that document and comment upon our every activity, from the routine to the extraordinary. Your day might be punctuated by dozens or even hundreds of photographs sent and received by text, Snapchat, or Instagram. In many cases, the producer of the images you receive is not the news or media industry but an individual, perhaps someone or a small group of people that you know personally, with whom you exchange meanings and messages that are sent, received, and interpreted in a reciprocal circuit. In the back-and-forth flow, meanings and messages are fluid and changing. Much of the pleasure of this exchange comes not only from "getting" the meaning intended by your friend or family member and communicating back what you intend but also from re-interpreting and joking about intended and received meanings, changing the messages tied to a given picture, icon, or written text message through group interaction. This fluidity of signification is an aspect of all visual