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, where they were placed by the producer waiting for viewers to find them. Rather, meanings are produced through the complex negotiations that make up the social process and practices through which we produce and interpret images. In the process of making, interpreting, and using images, meanings change. The production of meaning involves at least three elements besides the image itself and its producer: (1) the codes and conventions that structure the image and that cannot be separated from the content of the image; (2) the viewers and how they interpret or experience the image; and (3) the contexts in which an image is exhibited and viewed. Although we can say that images have what we call dominant or primary meanings, they are interpreted and used by viewers in ways that do not strictly conform to these meanings.

Throughout this book, we discuss the viewer more than the audience. A viewer is, in the most basic sense of the term, an individual who looks. An audience is a collective of lookers. In focusing on the viewer, we are concerned with the activity of the individual as a social category that emerges through practices of looking. Viewing involves a set of relational social practices. These practices occur not simply between individual human subjects who look and are looked at but among people, objects, and technologies in the world. Viewing, even for the individual subject, is a multimodal activity. The elements that come into play when we look may include not only images but also other images with which they are displayed or published, our own bodies, other bodies, built and natural objects and entities, and the institutions and social contexts in 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, for example), context-specific (a scientific image used as an information source in a laboratory), or public (a news photograph).

By looking at the viewer, we can understand certain aspects of practices of looking that cannot be captured by examining the concept of the audience, an entity into which producers hope to mold viewers as consumers. The term *interpellation* is an important aspect of this point. To interpellate, in the traditional usage of this concept, is to interrupt a procedure in order to question someone or something formally, as in a legal or governmental setting (in a Parliamentary procedure, for example). The term was adapted by political and media theorists in the 1970s, who made the case that *images interpellate viewers*. They used this term, as we do, to describe the way that images and media texts seem to call out to us, catching our attention. Here, we draw on and move beyond the theories of French philosopher Louis Althusser, whose ideas theorists have drawn on to suggest that ideologies "hail" subjects and enlist them as their authors. Images hail viewers as individuals, even when each viewer knows that many people are looking at the same image—that the image was not intended "just for me" but reaches a wider audience. There is an interesting paradox inherent in this experience: for viewer interpellation by an image to be effective, the viewer must implicitly understand himself or herself as being a member of a social group that shares codes and conventions through which the image becomes meaningful. I may feel that an image apprehends or touches me personally, but it can do so only if I am a member of a group to whom its codes and conventions "speak," even if the image does not "say" the same thing to me as it does to someone else. I do not have to like or appreciate the dominant messages of the image to be interpellated by it or to understand that message. To be interpellated by an image, then, is to know that the image is meant for me to understand, even if I feel that my understanding is unique or goes against the grain of a meaning that seems to have been intended.

Advertising seeks, of course, to interpellate viewer-consumers in constructing them within the "you" of the ad. The codes and meanings of an advertisement, for example, might be entirely clear to me, even if I do not share or am opposed to the tastes and values it promotes and even if the ad tries to represent "people like me" in a manner that I feel is "not really me" or is offensive to me. This Olay ad interpellates the viewer with the promise of an idealized future self. The ad uses the "O" of "You" to target the model, who stands in for the consumer and whose transformation is promised. Here, the ad visualizes the "you" that is normally implied within image texts. The message of the image, even if not intended for me, nonetheless draws me in as a spectator, interpellating me, even though I know I am not the person for whom it was meant. Some images strongly interpellate viewers, some do not. But even if the primary or dominant message conveyed by the image is not, strictly speaking, "for me," my experience with the image may be personal in that there are various roles I may occupy in relationship to the image.
In the process of interpellation we are describing, an image or media text can bring out in viewers an experience of being "hailed" in ways that do not always promote a sense of being exactly the subject for whom the message is intended. As John Ellis notes, the term audience, a unifying concept that is so important to media marketing experts, does not adequately capture this process. A viewer's direct and complete engagement with the image producers' intended messages may be the goal of the producer, but such an engagement is not really possible. Even the most personal images work this way. I may feel that a photograph of a loved one interpellates, or speaks, to me and only me, but it does so through the photographic codes and conventions of "the personal" that we use to convey such messages. Such photographs can use close-ups to give the sense that the photographed subject looks directly into the viewer's eyes and soul. Romantic photographs of stars coveted by fans use the same conventions and may hail viewers in the same way, inciting romantic fantasies of intimacy. I may be interpellated by such an image, recognizing romantic love as a dominant or intended message that others will "get" without having these feelings invoked in me personally but rather recognizing them as feelings others are likely to have (those who admire the star, for example). I may even feel disgust or contempt for the intended message. This would be another way of being interpellated by the image.

By focusing on the viewer (and not the audience) throughout this book, we are emphasizing the practices through which images and media texts reach out and touch audience members in ways that engender experiences of individual agency and interpretive autonomy, even in cases in which the image is widely viewed as a shared text with effective dominant meanings with which we may or may not fully engage. For some theorists, the effective delivery of dominant messages is "ideological" in the sense that "individual" felt experience with the image or text is thought to be a false feeling that producers aim to achieve in viewers through marketing strategies that figure out which codes and conventions will most effectively "reach" targeted audiences. In this view, to feel touched by a mass image is to harbor a mistaken understanding of oneself as the individual for whom that image's meaning is personally intended. The viewer, in this view, is duped by the image. We understand the process of interpellation to work differently from this. To be interpellated or touched in an individual way as a viewer is a common and all but unavoidable
aspect of looking at images and media texts, public and private. But this aspect of practices of looking is neither insidious nor fully controlled by external forces such as advertisers or the media industry. Individual human agency and desire are not wholly controlled by the strategies of industry market experts, and dominant meanings are not the only or the most important ones that we experience. By considering viewers, not audiences, we can describe some of the many ways that viewers make meanings outside the boundaries of producers’ intended messages and effects, even as viewers recognize those intended meanings.

Producers’ Intended Meanings

Who produces images? The concept of the producer becomes complicated when we consider forms that involve multiple producers, as in the case of a major studio film production or the work of a collective of artists. In film parlance, a producer is a person who identifies financing and oversees the many jobs involved in a production. When the art collective Group Material displayed their public art throughout the streets and subways of New York City in the 1980s, the “producer” widely noted for generating this category or “brand” of work was the collective itself, and not the individual artists who designed each work. In advertising, the term producer could refer to the advertising agency, the lead designer, or the company whose product is represented in the ad. When we use the term producer, then, we may be referring to an individual maker (as in the case of one artist who produces a painting), a plurality of creative individuals unified by a shared set of aesthetic strategies of production design and display (the art collective or collaborators creating a work), or a corporate conglomerate engaged in different phases and aspects of an ad. The art collective RTMark plays up the anonymity of the individual artist in the manufacture of goods in postindustrial capitalism by presenting itself as an anonymous artist collective structured like a corporation and using corporate language and investment strategies to make a parodic critique of the mass visual culture of commodity production and branding.

French theorist Roland Barthes, in his classic 1967 essay on “The Death of the Author,” was concerned with questions of authority and power between the individual author and readers. We adapt his concept of the author’s “death” to consider questions of authority and power as they are enacted between viewers and producers of images and media texts. According to Barthes, the text offers a multidimensional space that the reader deciphers or interprets. There is no ultimate authorial meaning for readers to uncover in the text. The approach to the image that we adopt throughout this book follows a similar logic. Although images and media texts may hold dominant meanings, it is the job of the critical reader not to simply point out dominant meanings for others to see but to show how these meanings are made. The text is also open to meanings and interpretations that exist alongside and even against these more obvious meanings. Barthes advocated for the work of a
critical and analytical reader whose interpretive practices are grounded in the historical contexts and positions from which texts are always read, as a means of showing how the authority of the author as the primary producer of the literary text is in fact a myth. His point was, in part, that texts are produced in the act of reading them and that these acts are performed from the cultural and political perspectives of readers and never fully according to the intentions of the author or producer.

Barthes's idea of critical reading was adapted among critics and theorists writing about images as a means of advocating for critical viewing practices—that is, practices of looking that take into account the authority and power of the historically and culturally situated viewer in the production of meanings. This perspective was especially important at the moment in history at which Barthes wrote, which preceded the era of the 1980s and 1990s, when video and computer hardware and software became widely available to the broad public. Today it goes without saying that consumers can produce their own media images and texts, because the technology to self-produce or to copy and manipulate found images is so widely available. During the time that Barthes's essay first circulated, however, home video and digital production and editing programs were a futuristic fantasy. The idea of the consumer of images as the producer of meaning was quite radical and new in the 1960s and 1970s, but today it is an everyday reality.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault, in his 1979 essay, "What is an Author?" written in response to Barthes's "Death of the Author," argues that the concept of author did not always exist and will probably pass out of relevance but that it is not exactly dead. Foucault uses the concept of an "author function" rather than an "author." We adapt this concept as a means of thinking about the producer function. The producer function is a set of beliefs that lead us to have certain expectations about a work with regard to the status of its producer. The function of the author or producer is linked to the idea that "someone" (an artist, a company) must stand behind any given image. Copyright law is based on the premise that ownership of creative expression can be traced to someone, whether that be an individual or a company that owns the rights to the work. The "producer function" concept helps us to understand that "authorship" derives not just from who created something but often from who owns the rights to something. When we speak of a Nike ad, for example, we attribute the producer function to Nike because the corporation, and not the actual creative director of the ad, is the entity that owns and appears to speak through the work.

Most if not all images have a meaning that is preferred by their producers. Advertisers, for example, conduct audience research to try to ensure that the meanings they want to convey about a particular product are the ones viewers will perceive when they encounter an advertisement for that product. Artists, graphic designers, filmmakers, and other image producers create images with the intent that we read them in a certain way. It is also the case that architects design buildings with the intent that people will engage with and utilize the spaces in particular ways.
Analyzing images and built spaces according to what we believe to be the intentions of their producers, however, is rarely a completely useful strategy. We usually have no way to know for certain what a producer, designer, or artist intended his or her image or structure to mean. Furthermore, knowing a producer's intentions often does not tell us much about the image, because intentions may not match up with what viewers actually take away from an image or text. People may experience an image or media text differently from how it is intended to be seen, either because they bring experiences and associations that were not anticipated by its producers or because the meanings they derive are informed by the context in which an image is seen. Context cannot fully be controlled by the producer. For example, we could say that the intentions of the creators of the many advertising images that are on display in an urban context may not necessarily coincide with the ways those images are seen by the many different viewers who encounter them. The visual clutter of the context alone of, say, a place like Times Square, may affect how viewers interpret these images, as may juxtapositions with other images. Similarly, a video that is uploaded onto YouTube will be instantly linked to many other videos,

**FIG. 2.2**
Times Square, New York, 2008
and how viewers see it can be influenced by the range of videos they see before and after it. Many contemporary images, such as advertisements and television images, are viewed in a huge variety of contexts, each of which may affect their meanings. As visual culture scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff writes, “intervisuality,” or the interaction of a variety of modes of visuality, is a key aspect of visual culture; thus any experience of viewing may incorporate different media forms, networks of infrastructure and meaning, and intertextual meanings. 4 Importantly, viewers themselves bring cultural associations that will affect their individual interpretations of an image, as our discussion below will show. This does not mean that viewers wrongly or subjectively interpret images or that images are unsuccessful or fail to persuade viewers when intended and received meanings diverge. Rather, meanings are created in part when, where, and by whom images are consumed, and not only when, where, and by whom they are produced. Simply put, a producer may make an image or media text, but he or she is not in full control of the meanings that are subsequently made through the work.

Although it has always been the case that viewers make different meanings in different cultural contexts, the context of global cultural flows has made this even more true. For example, in 1998, film viewers in China had an unexpected and overwhelmingly positive response to Titanic, the 1997 movie directed by James Cameron. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, in its entry on “cultural globalization,” scores of middle-aged Chinese viewers saw the film numerous times and were reduced to tears, prompting a lively street trade in facial tissue outside Shanghai theaters. Sales of posters and the soundtrack were strong, as were video sales, with an estimated 25 million pirated and 300,000 legitimate copies sold. Titanic was invested with meanings in China that did not match the meanings produced in the film by its Western viewers, and these meanings were not anticipated by the movie’s producers. These meanings were produced by viewers who spontaneously used the text to share emotions about a difficult cultural transition. As the author of the Britannica entry writes, “Titanic served as a socially acceptable vehicle for the public expression of regret by a generation of aging Chinese revolutionaries who had devoted their lives to building a form of socialism that had long since disappeared.” 5 We learn from this example that viewers may make meanings that are not intended or anticipated by its producers, and that viewers are active agents in the production of meaning. Some critics might argue that the movie’s marketing to China simply expanded the U.S. movie industry’s power and authority and is an example of a kind of cultural imperialism and market domination. The author of the Encyclopedia Britannica entry makes a different case: in fact, the production of meaning was very much in the hands of the viewers, who made the text their own.

Neither interpretation of the movie is more or less accurate than the other. An image creates meaning through its circulation among viewers. Hence, we can say that meanings are not inherent in images. Rather, meanings are the product of a complex social interaction among image, viewers, and context. Dominant meanings—the meanings that tend to predominate within a given culture—emerge out of this
complex social interaction and may exist alongside alternative and even opposing meanings.

Aesthetics and Taste

All images are subject to judgments about their qualities (such as beauty or coolness) and their capacity to have an impact on viewers. The criteria used to interpret and give value to images depend on cultural codes, or shared concepts, concerning what makes an image pleasing or unpleasant, shocking or banal, interesting or boring. As we explained earlier, these qualities do not reside in the image or object but depend on the contexts in which it is viewed, on the codes that prevail in a society, and on the viewer who is making that judgment. All viewer interpretations involve two fundamental concepts of value—aesthetics and taste.

When we say that we appreciate something (a work of art, a photograph) for "aesthetic" reasons, we usually imply that the value of the work resides in the pleasure it brings us through its beauty, its style, or the creative and technical virtuosity that went into its production. Aesthetics has traditionally been associated with philosophy and the arts, and aesthetic objects have stood apart from utilitarian objects. In the twentieth century, the idea of aesthetics steadily moved away from the belief that beauty resides within a particular object or image. By the end of the century, it was widely accepted that aesthetic judgment about what we consider naturally beautiful or universally pleasing is in fact culturally determined. We no longer think of beauty as a universally shared set of qualities. Contemporary concepts of aesthetics emphasize the ways in which the criteria for what is beautiful and what is not are based on taste, which is not innate but rather culturally specific.

Taste, however, is not simply a matter of individual interpretation. Rather, taste is informed by experiences relating to one’s class, cultural background, education, and other aspects of identity. This idea was popularized in the late twentieth century by the influential book by the sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), which captured the century’s changed understanding of taste as something that is always connected to social identity and class status. Bourdieu provided a description of tastes and their origins in patterns of class distinction. Following from Bourdieu, when we speak of taste or say that someone “has taste” we are usually using culturally specific and class-based concepts. When we say that people have “good taste” we may mean that they participate and are educated in middle-class or upper-class notions of what is aesthetically pleasing, whether or not they actually inhabit these class positions. Or we may regard someone as having “good” taste when they have in common with us a particular aesthetic or style that we believe reflects some special, elite knowledge, such as participation in a market that trades in “quality,” edgy, or elite products. Taste can be a marker of education and an awareness of elite cultural values, even if one’s expression of taste is to stick one’s nose up at what is deemed “good” taste. “Bad taste” is sometimes
regarded as a product of ignorance of what is deemed "quality" or "tasteful" within a society. Embracing "bad" taste or "artless" taste, on the other hand, can also signify cultural belonging to an educated elite that stands in opposition to the dictates of taste. Taste, in this understanding, is something that can be learned through contact with culture. But it is also something that one can studiously defy. Taste can be exercised and displayed through patterns of consumption and display.

Notions of taste provide the basis for the idea of connoisseurship. The traditional image of a connoisseur evokes a "well-bred" person, a "gentleman" who possesses "good taste" and knows the difference between a good work of art and a bad one and who can afford the "quality" work over the shoddy reproduction. A connoisseur is considered to be more capable than others of passing judgment on the quality of cultural objects. Traditionally "good taste" has been associated with knowledge of "high" culture forms such as fine art, literature, and classical music. Yet what counts as good taste is more complex than this notion of taste suggests. The term kitsch formerly referred to images and objects that are trite, cheaply sentimental, and formulaic. Kitsch is associated with mass-produced objects that offer cheap or gaudy versions of classical beauty (plastic reproductions of crystal chandeliers, for example). Cheap tourist trinkets, gift cards embossed with seraphim paintings on velvet—these are kitsch. Art critic Clement Greenberg wrote a famous essay in 1939, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," in which he argued that unlike avant garde art, kitsch is formulaic, offering cheap and inauthentic emotion to the uneducated masses. In the 1980s the concept of kitsch was newly revived by postmodern artists, architects, and critics interested in defying the austere aesthetics and universalizing values of modern works of art and architecture. Embracing the lowbrow aesthetics of kitsch and the "bad" design elements of everyday mass culture became a means of defying modernism's tendency toward elite, "high quality" design. Kitsch objects also gained value precisely because they became recognized as iconic of a historical moment in which everyday life was saturated with cheesiness. Certain objects formerly deemed "tasteless" or just silly, the everyday artifacts of the everyday middle-class or working-class consumer, were given new value over time precisely because they had become iconic artifacts of a past era. The educated connoisseur can collect and display these now-valuable artifacts to demonstrate engagement in the culture of lowbrow aesthetics.

The lava lamp is an example of how kitsch can gain value in a second level of meaning. When it was first made in England in the postwar period, the lamp, in which wax floats in strange shapes in oil, was widely regarded as ugly. But in the 1960s, the weird Astro Lamp (in the American market dubbed the Lava Lite) meshed perfectly with the tastes of the psychedelic generation. The light then fell out of fashion again, tumbling back into the obscurity of bad taste such that even thrift shop collectors spurned it. However, with the broad resurgence of interest in 1960s music and visual and clothing styles in the 1990s, the lamp was back in vogue, to the delight of the company that bought out the original U.S. manufacturer after the
FIG. 2.3
Lava lamp

Lava lamp fell out of favor during the 1980s. Now the original lamp goes for over $100 on eBay, and the copy sells for about $20 in retail stores. In contemporary taste cultures, the circulation of objects through categories of taste and the reclassification of objects according to new scales of value show us that hierarchies of taste and beauty are not fixed but are relative to historical and cultural interpretations.

The Most Wanted Paintings on the Web (1995), a Web work by Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid, artists originally from the former Soviet Union who have worked in the United States since 1978, is an excellent project through which to examine questions about taste in an international context. The artists, who have worked in the medium of painting to parody and critique forms such as Soviet realism, commissioned a professional market survey in which people in the United States and Russia were asked about their recreational preferences, their politics and lifestyles, their knowledge of famous artists and historical figures, and their preferences for or reactions against paintings with angles, curves, brushstrokes, colors, sizes, themes, and styles. Komar and Melamid then tallied and computed the results of the survey, using their findings to arrive at a formula for the creation of paintings showing each country's most and least wanted image. Each painting represents a composite of the dominant answers from each group. These paintings were exhibited under the rubric of "The People's Choice." Both countries disliked abstract images and preferred calm landscapes in which were featured well-known figures. America's "most wanted" painting was calculated to be "dishwasher-sized" and to include a landscape, wild animals, and George Washington, whereas America's "most unwanted" painting was abstract with sharp angles and a thick textured surface. The Russian most wanted painting displays Jesus in a landscape similar to that depicted in America's most wanted. Both paintings utilize a sort of pictorial realism associated with Soviet-era state-mandated form. Komar and Melamid expanded this project into a Web extravaganza for which groups in twelve countries were polled and their preferences analyzed to arrive at digitized renderings of composite paintings for each nation. This Web project is hosted by the Dia Center for the Arts and has as its primary sponsor the Chase Manhattan Bank, an institutional relationship that the artists no doubt find befitting of their ironic message. With a few exceptions, the results of this poll are remarkably consistent, with most countries preferring soft landscapes and pictorial realism over abstract, minimal compositions. Italy's most
Komar and Melamid, *Italy's Most Wanted Painting* and *Italy's Most Unwanted Painting* (from People's Choice series), 1997

The wanted painting, pictured here, is, by contrast, more impressionistic, whereas Italy's most unwanted painting features a picture of Elvis and a nude male figure.

One of the chief points of this project is to make a joke about the degree to which the art market is not immune to consumer values and tastes; artists are not unresponsive to the vagaries of a mass public psychology of taste uninformed by the avant-garde aesthetics represented in some museums and galleries of modern art. In this project, decisions about the making of art are brought down to the level of the Nielsen television poll, turning the revered individual fine art painting into something tacky and generically pleasing. The project is also a pointed critique of the ways in which opinion polls and statistics about collective opinions carry so much weight in contemporary society and in the media, even as it uses those statistics to render its works. This art project posed the question about what art would look like if it were produced by audience ratings and opinion polls. Yet at the same time it is also a visual manifestation of just how shallow opinion polls can be in providing an image of the tastes of viewers, here made into a mockery of the conglomerate concept of "the people."

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu established through extensive survey research that taste is used by individuals to enhance their position within the social order and that
distinction is the means through which they establish their taste as different from that of other, lower classes of people. This is not a matter of actual class position based on one's economic status but of cultural capital. "Taste classifies," Bourdieu famously wrote, "and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed." Bourdieu also concluded that taste is learned through exposure to social and cultural institutions that promote certain class-based assumptions about correct taste. So, for instance, institutions such as museums function not only to educate people about the history of art but also to instill in them a broader sense of what is tasteful and what is not, what is valuable and what is not, and what is "real" art and what is not. Through these institutions, people, regardless of their class position, learn to be "discriminating" viewers and consumers of images and objects. That is, they "learn" to rank images and objects according to a system of taste that is deeply steeped in class-based values. Even the collecting of objects "in bad taste" is steeped in elite class values, insofar as one must be educated in the meaning of everyday design and kitsch style to appreciate those aesthetics.

In Bourdieu's theory, all aspects of life are interconnected and unified in what he called a habitus—a set of dispositions and preferences we share as social subjects that are related to our class position, education, and social standing. This means that our taste in art is related to our tastes in music, food, fashion, furniture, movies, sports, and leisure activities and is in turn related to our profession, class status, and educational level. Taste may often work to the detriment of people of lower classes because it relegates objects and ways of seeing associated with their lifestyles as less worthy of attention and respect. What is more, the very things deemed tasteful—works of fine art, for example—are often off limits to most consumers.

These distinctions between different kinds of taste cultures have traditionally been understood as the difference between high and low culture. As we noted in the introduction, the most common definition of culture throughout history was the idea of the best of a given culture. However, this definition was highly class-based, with those cultural pursuits of the ruling class seen as high culture and the activities of the working class as low culture. Thus high culture has traditionally meant fine art, classical music, opera, and ballet. Low culture was a term used to refer to comic strips, television, and at least initially, the cinema. However, in the late twentieth century, this division of high and low was heavily criticized, not only because it affirms classist hierarchies but also because it is not an accurate measure of the relationship between the cultural forms people consume and the class positions they occupy. The distinction between fine art and popular culture has been consistently blurred in the art movements of the late twentieth century, from pop art to postmodernism. (We discuss this work in chapters 7 and 8.) In addition, as we have noted, the collection of certain kinds of cultural artifacts, such as kitsch, which are valued now precisely
because they once were the expression of the everyday consumer's "bad" taste, blurs distinctions between high and low. Furthermore, analyses of B movies (and other cultural products such as popular romance novels) that were once regarded as low culture have emphasized the impact and value of contemporary popular culture among specific communities and individuals, who interpret these texts to strengthen their communities or to challenge oppression. Comic books and graphic novels, once considered to be for children or the uneducated, are now thought of as mainstream and cutting-edge cultural forms. Animated films are now one of the most popular and lucrative genres of popular film, aimed at all ages. It was once the case that universities did not study forms of popular culture—in British universities, for instance, even the study of the novel (as opposed to poetry) did not begin until the mid-twentieth century, because novels were considered lowbrow. The study of popular culture and visual culture in all its forms is now integral to university and high school curricula because of the now widespread belief that we cannot understand a culture without analyzing its production and consumption of all forms of culture, from high to low.

The model of analysis that Bourdieu used is class-stratified in ways that are specific to what he perceived to be a largely homogeneous native French population when he collected his survey data in the mid-1960s. Both the context in which he asked those questions—that of a postwar pre-May 1968 French society that was significantly class-stratified, with a highly class-based educational system—and the kinds of questions he asked of French bourgeois society are historically and culturally specific. His idea that categories of taste and distinction trickle down from the upper, educated to the lower, less educated classes does not account for the dynamics of taste and judgment in the evaluation of those valued cultural forms that began as the expression of a marginalized culture or class, such as jazz in the 1920s and hip-hop in the 1980s. In the case of forms such as these, taste and distinction can trickle up to more affluent, culturally dominant groups. The same can be said about the graffiti or street art of producers such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose graffiti was brought from the streets to the galleries in New York in the 1980s, or Shepard Fairey, the world-renowned street artist, founder of Swindle magazine, and designer.
of the loading screen for Guitar Hero II who stenciled and posted his André the Giant logo in urban public spaces in the 1980s. Fairey’s Obey stickers and stencils were designed to get people to think about the messages of images on the street. Yet their meaning was often ambiguous, what Fairey calls an “experiment in phenomenology.” His artwork is now copyrighted under the label “Obey Giant” and an offshoot clothing line for sale in mall skate stores alongside Vans, Diesel, and Stussy.

Bourdieu’s system does not help us to understand the particular patterns of minority, immigrant, or countercultural values and distinction—for example the patterns of taste and distinction among those who immigrated to France from Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa in the years following the demise of French colonialism. Our point is not only that cultural values and tastes may trickle up or may develop differently among members of a politically and culturally minoritized diaspora but also that cultural values and tastes are increasingly subject to movement in a variety of directions, as markets diversify in kind laterally, as well as to globalization. In today’s culture, images and objects circulate within and across social strata, cultural categories, and geographical distances with speed and ease, such that youth cultures in Central Asia and North America may look very much alike in their clothing choices despite these groups being separated by geographic distances and political differences. The globalization of manga (Japanese comics) is an example of this phenomenon in which taste and distinction are forged in ways that do not strictly follow Bourdieu’s observed patterns of class and cultural influence.

Collecting, Display, and Institutional Critique

As we noted in chapter 1, there are many ways in which the value of a work of art is determined in the art market. One of the key economic and cultural factors in the valuing of art is collecting by art institutions such as museums and by private collectors. Not only does this activity create a market for art, but it also creates a financial context in which work is expected to appreciate in value over time. The collecting of art for economic and cultural capital has a long history. This seventeenth-century painting by David Teniers of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm’s collection was one of the first visual catalogings of an art collection. In this image, Teniers imagined the archduke standing among his many paintings as a means to both illustrate the collection and affirm the importance of the archduke’s role as collector. The large scale of the painting, in which the figures seem diminutive, affirms the size of the collection. This painting thus functions as an actual catalogue of the archduke’s collection, as an affirmation of his taste and role as a connoisseur, and as evidence of the value of his large collection. Ownership is a key factor in establishing value in art. Much of the value of art collections is established through the details of the provenance of artworks, such as the history of who has owned them and when they changed ownership—information that has little to do with the artist or the work’s creation.