

Christ to COKE
HOW IMAGE BECOMES ICON

MARTIN KEMP

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi

Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi

New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece

Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore

South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press

in the UK and in certain other countries

Published in the United States

by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

© Martin Kemp 2012

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published 2012

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,

or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate
reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department,

Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover
and you must impose the same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Data available

Typeset by Sparkes—www.sparkespublishing.com

Printed in Europe

on acid-free paper by

Gratos

ISBN 978-0-19-958111-5

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

rusalem,
Media
ch 1951.
ory of Sci-
Witelson

storisches
ction.
by the

010.

Introduction

Origins

THE IDEA FOR THIS BOOK can be dated to 2003 and, more specifically, to the fiftieth anniversary of the publication in *Nature* of a proposed structure for DNA by James Watson and Francis Crick. I had been asked by the science journal *Nature* to provide an essay on the double helix's remarkable visual history for their free-standing publication *50 Years of DNA*. My contribution was entitled 'The *Mona Lisa* of Modern Science'. The original *Mona Lisa* had much occupied me over the years. I have been researching, teaching, writing, broadcasting, and curating exhibitions about Leonardo da Vinci since the late 1960s. Of course there are also Leonardo's *Last Supper* and his 'Vitruvian Man' (the nude man tracing the circle and square with his extended arms and legs), which have achieved

a status only a little less lofty in the pantheon of icons. Teaching first-year classes in Glasgow and St Andrew's I had inevitably grappled with other canonical works in the history of European art: Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding*, Michelangelo's *David*, Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*, Constable's *Hay Wain* (perhaps rather an English choice), Rodin's *Thinker*, Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, Munch's *Scream*, Picasso's *Guernica*, and so on. Readers can readily add to this slim list of examples. This is to say nothing of images outside this European mainstream, such as the Egyptian *Queen Nefertiti* in Berlin and the prehistoric *Willendorf Venus* in Vienna.

After moving to Oxford, I have been giving talks about Leonardo to various leadership seminars, looking at his ways of thinking and representing—under the general banner of lateral thinking. Most were given under the aegis of the Said Business School. I suggested that I might develop a lecture or workshop in iconic images, on the basis that I already have two of them under my belt, and thinking that they are very relevant to the 'branding' concerns that have come to loom so large for all private and public bodies. After all, the COCA-COLA bottle and the Nike 'Swoosh' are iconic images *par excellence*, and any company would give much to achieve such universal brand identity. Furthermore, the mega-famous works of art have been adopted and adapted ceaselessly in commercial advertising. As it happens the offer of the lecture was not taken up in the face of the seductions of Leonardo's 'universal genius'. Perhaps it will be after the publication of this book.

Anyway, I began to think about the obvious questions. Why have iconic images achieved their status? Do they have anything in common? A tidy answer to the second of these questions has remained elusive, not least because it is founded on a false premise, as I hope to show in due course. The first question becomes more tractable if it is asked in terms of 'how?'; that is to say if we plot the key moves through which each image has risen to extravagant levels of fame. I am not promising to narrate the life histories of each of the selected images, as I rashly claimed to friends at the outset. Rather I will be looking at the origins of each and picking out some of the most notable and curious steps along the course of their ascent. Each has promiscuously spawned such a huge number of progeny that only a few will have to stand for the many, for obvious practical reasons. I have concentrated particularly on notable, significant, idiosyncratic, and (often) bizarre examples amongst the legions of copies,

reprod we see The I woul some from the te and ic Beate edly ic gener and aj render cure a claim If I ing. A wides assoc such of its is a b when famo ernet degra Or legen they bald made tion, histo com Mon Inde Ev agati

reproductions, versions, variants, pastiches, and parodies. Once alerted, we see them everywhere and begin to realize their ubiquity.

There is also the obvious question of how to define an iconic image. I would prefer in some ways not to give a definition, since this suggests some clear and definable boundary that the image crosses when it moves from being very famous to fully iconic. The problem is compounded by the tendency of the modern media to downgrade such terms as genius and icon and by applying them to too many examples. Elvis Presley, The Beatles, Marilyn Monroe, and Muhammad Ali (Cassius Clay) are undoubtedly icons in their popular domains and even beyond, particularly to my generation. However the term iconic is now scattered around so liberally and applied to figures or things of passing and local celebrity that it has tended to become debased. By contrast, the eleven images here are as secure and universal in their iconic status as any cultural products can ever claim to be.

If I have to give a definition of a visual icon, let me suggest the following. An iconic image is one that has achieved wholly exceptional levels of widespread recognizability and has come to carry a rich series of varied associations for very large numbers of people across time and cultures, such that it has to a greater or lesser degree transgressed the parameters of its initial making, function, context, and meaning. I am aware that this is a bit ponderous. I have developed my own rule-of-thumb instinct for when an image is simply very famous, not least on the basis that the very famous still tends to reside within the parameters of reference that governed its original making. But absolute tests are not to be applied with any degree of confidence.

One striking characteristic of truly iconic images is that they accrue legends to a prodigious degree that is largely independent of how long they have been around. Once one of them crosses a certain boundary, the bald historical facts and the original zone of function and meaning seem inadequate. An extraordinary image demands an extraordinary explanation, ideally involving some kind of 'secret', especially when the actual historical evidence points to quite prosaic origins. Over the years I have come to recognize this seemingly insatiable demand with respect to the *Mona Lisa*. None of the images here is immune from the need for legends. Indeed, they seem actively to incite them.

Even participants in the actual making of the images and their propagation can all too readily become caught up in the myths, becoming

An inevitable early stage in my project involved compiling lists, often with the help of friends. One of the nice things about writing and discussing this book is that everyone has a pointed opinion on what warrants inclusion. Given my working definition, all opinions deserve respect, and I cannot claim to be more of an expert than the next person as to whether this or that image should elbow its way in. I can at least say that I have given the matter a lot of thought and canvassed a wide range of opinions. The lists, as they rapidly grew, demanded some kind of ranking, ordering, and classification if they were to make much sense. It rapidly became clear that there are two basic categories, general and specific. The general ones represent an entity that can be recognized and expressed in terms that are noun-like—like a lion or a heart. They do not rely for their basic potency on their identity with this or that individual lion or heart, although they may be represented by specific individuals. The specific examples are recognizable in terms of known individuals and therefore share the properties of proper names—like Christ and Che. But the categories are not watertight. The generic becomes specific as soon as it is materialized in a given context, and the individual comes to stand for something general enough if it is to achieve its very wide reach. DNA and E = mc², my two last examples, do not quite fit into either category with

The examples included here are all static, and even those that are three-dimensional work at high levels of efficacy even in flat representations. Moving into architecture and engineering (e.g. the Forth Rail Bridge) would have expanded the brief too far and introduced too many extra criteria. It is arguable that moving images never become truly iconic without crystallizing into a memorable still. I think this continues to apply even in the age of clips on YouTube. In any case, film and video also would have stretched my brief beyond any practical limits. The still, flat image clearly carries a special cognitive potency, working in a particularly effective way with our perception and memory.

Choices and Chapters

honestly convinced in retrospect of something that seems not to have been the case. We all tend to do this with our own lives. A few of the contemporary witnesses I consulted for the various chapters presented these kinds of problems, and their evidence needs to be evaluated carefully, as with all historical sources from any era.

comfort, since their relationships between form and content are different from the other examples. The molecule of DNA features as diagrams and models but is never literally 'seen' in itself, while Einstein's formula is a concept that assumes visual form only when written down.

A more differentiated classification gradually emerged, and was by type. The types came and went, but eventually crystallized into the current eleven chapters. I like eleven rather than the tidier twelve. Eleven is a good prime number and resists regular sub-division. However, the number has no rationale beyond its utility to me and, I hope, the reader.

Where to begin was not the biggest problem. The term 'icon' (from *eikon*, Greek for image) has come to be applied specifically to devotional images characteristic of Greek and Russian Orthodox Christian traditions. We have no difficulty in conjuring up a typical Russian-style icon—a highly formalized and standardized flat representation of Christ or the Virgin Mary or a saint in rich pigments on a tooled gold background. Large eyes, emphatically almond-shaped, stare unblinkingly at us. The eyes, as the cliché goes, 'follow us round the room'. The icon of Christ serves to define the iconic species in its own right. It is what biologists call the 'type specimen'.

The cross or cross-shape seemed to follow naturally, given its Christian prominence. It represents the simplest kind of formal or graphic device. It can function in contexts in which figurative images are unwelcome or impractical, and can be drawn or constructed with great ease in almost any medium. The cross also provides opportunities to reach out into another cultural framework, and into a variant form that carries stark implications, the Nazi swastika. The cross exhibits extraordinary elasticity of meaning in different contexts, but tends to have predominantly severe connotations.

The heart refers to something complicated in its original bodily form but has come to assume a special schematic shape—the heart-shape—that carries a wide range of meanings, almost always positive. It functions across the religious and secular with equal potency. It has also come to function as a hieroglyphic word, as in Milton Glaser's famous slogan, 'I ♥ NY'. It helps if the heart is blood red.

Animals and to a lesser degree plants have come to signify almost universal meanings or characteristics, and none to a greater degree than the lion. Its designation as the 'king of the jungle' crosses cultures and times to an unrivalled degree. The eagle is also strongly present across cultures,

Selecting a range of possible representations of a particular person somehow fails to do. When it comes to selecting an example of 'high art', there really is no contest. I would have been happy to avoid the *Mona Lisa*, given the fact that I have already written extensively on it (or 'her'). However, as it happened, writing about it in the present context—having left this chapter until last—presented unexpectedly fresh opportunities. Recent claims have been made that Munch's *Scream* has supplanted Leonardo's icon, most notably as an angst-ridden symbol of our age, but I do not think it is a serious competitor.

A modern, popular, and 'posterized' *Mona Lisa* also more or less selected itself, namely the head of Che (Guevara). A lumbering sports utility vehicle (a 'Chelsea tractor' in the UK) disgorges a posh family in Sloane Square in London with two kids wearing T-shirts that carry a highly simplified rendition of the face, hair, and beret of Che, the communist revolutionary. We may wonder how image, social communication, and original subject have become almost totally dislocated.

The schematic picture of Che depended on a photograph by Alberto Korda, and the photograph itself is famous in its own right. However, I selected as my leader amongst famous photographs the incredibly moving snapshot by Nick Ut of a naked Vietnamese girl running down a road after being hideously napalmed. In my taking of soundings amongst acquaintances, there was probably more diversity of choice in the photographic category than any other. This is in part due to the sheer numbers of works from which to choose. No one thought that my choice was misguided, but some would have selected a different one. At least Joe Rosenthal's famed photograph of the raising of the American flag on Iwo Jima and Robert Capra's notorious shot of infantryman feature in the next chapter.

For the national or political emblem, the Stars and Stripes has the prime claim, as well as presenting a livelier visual image than many flags. Some years ago the British Union Jack would have been the obvious choice, but the current realities of worldwide power have prevailed. The American flag is also hedged around with mythology and law in a way that was probably only rivaled by the symbol SPQR that dominated the ancient Roman empire (*Senatus Populusque Romanorum*—the Senate and People of Rome), and the Nazi banners of the last century.

am dealing
deficient acc
not aspiring
incontestably
claiming tha
sons for exch
I am no
the most fan
their defined
background
I am conscio
Obviously
clear bomb.
of Einstein hi
person cann
powerful hin
involved but
al presence in
However, in t
all the preced
a visual imag
It could be
its users wou
that confers
has been tran
what makes r
easy choice. I
specific visual
In the twe
pressed aspec
proved excep
teenager, I wo
to be without
COCA-COLA b
There is also
range of poss

Selecting a commercial emblem or logo obviously presented a wide range of possibilities. The Nike 'Swoosh' has already been mentioned. There is also the 'M' of McDonald's—and many others. However, the COCA-COLA bottle, coupled with the cursive script of its logo, seemed to be without a really close rival. Disliking COKE (and Pepsi), even as a teenager, I would have been happy to make another choice, but the myths proved exceptionally lively once I looked into some more-or-less suppressed aspects of its history.

In the twentieth century images specific to science have emerged as a specific visual genre in its own right. The double helix of DNA was a fairly easy choice. It has come to symbolize the human quest to understand what makes us tick, often in a bowdlerized manner. Its fascinating shape has been transferred into areas of art and decoration as a familiar cipher that confers status on its user, even in the most generalized way. Many of its users would be hard-pressed to explain what DNA is and how it works.

It could be objected that $E = mc^2$, based on Einstein's theories, is not a visual image at all. It certainly does not have the pictorial qualities of all the preceding examples, since it does not signify by *visual resemblance*. However, in its written or printed form, it has assumed a ubiquitous visual presence in the imagery of science, not only when theoretical physics is involved but also more generally to represent scientific endeavour—with powerful hints of mysterious conceptual realms into which the ordinary person cannot readily venture. It is also indelibly linked with the person of Einstein himself, the supreme modern exemplar of genius, and the nuclear bomb.

Obviously it would be wrong to insist that my choices are definitive. I am conscious that they are those of a British man of a certain age and background (and political conviction). I am prepared to argue that within their defined types each of the chosen images has an arguable case to be the most famous, and would deserve serious consideration in anyone's list. I am not getting into the game of arguing that there are good reasons for *excluding* a particular example, say the Nike 'Swoosh'. I am only claiming that amongst brand images the COKE bottle is in its own right incontestably iconic. I am prepared to stand by each inclusion but I am not aspiring to support exclusions on the basis that they are somehow deficient according to my criteria for an iconic image. Above all, since I am dealing with representatives of types, my list is not an all-time 'top

eleven' and is certainly not in ranking order. But if anyone wants to play the ranking game, they are welcome to do so.

The actual order of the chapters is determined by chronologies (that inevitably overlap) and by what seems to me to be a reasonably natural progression through the types. I did toy with the idea that I might reverse the order of the chapters, or even, in a moment of non-commercial fantasy, publish it in two versions, one of which would have the chapters in reverse order. In reality, the chapters can be read in any order that makes sense to the reader.

Looking over the chapters during and after their composition I am fully alert to the 'Western' slant of the enterprise, and indeed to the heavy representation of American material. This is in part because of my areas of cultural knowledge, but it does reflect a modern reality. The reality is that Western and Western-style media have come to dominate the making and dissemination of images on a worldwide basis. American commercial imperialism has transformed the COKE and Pepsi bottles into the most successful international invaders there have ever been. Even Einstein, a German-speaking Jew, was transformed into a figurehead of American freedom. The major twentieth-century wars that have spawned great war photographs have all involved America.

At one time the Buddha was on my list. The prophet Muhammad clearly was not, since representations of him are prohibited, as are 'graven images' of God in Judaism. I lost the Buddha partly because even the very familiar seated image of the portly divine did not seem quite to have achieved the same level of worldwide recognizability as Christ. I am not now quite so confident about this. I also had to admit to myself that anything I wrote on the Buddha would have been cannibalized from secondary literature rather than gaining the potential freshness that comes from my having confronted primary sources. Of 'non-Western' artworks, I thought long-est about Hokusai's renowned coloured woodcut of *The Great Wave*, but decided that its fame resided largely within the world of art, even if it has achieved very wide recognizability. Another significant factor in skewing any choice is that there is more recorded evidence about the generation of images in Western cultures than in any other, with the possible exceptions of China and modern Japan.

In China, an image-making society second to none before the nineteenth century, the most famous painting is *Qingming shanghe tu* (*Along the River During the Qing Ming Festival or Spring Festival on the River*) by Zhang

Zeduan, an
of a hands
orama of c
who are bi
of a day fr
notably pc
in restaur
cessor as f
tion as to v
(and I thin
China as a
Zeduan's i
wide basis
Even w/
the range
of the
of t
comple
in my kno
have been
to look at
if some b
mines the
The ran
ing the er
Office on
and rigou
appearing
Ava Heler
ous acces
commerc
in Jerusa
Separat
same ski
skills nee
the rubbis
one of th
people in
ation in t

Zeduan, an artist working in the eleventh to twelfth century. It consists of a handscroll over 17 feet long across which unfolds a wonderful panorama of countryside and town, populated with different types of people who are busily engaged in delightfully varied activities during the course of a day from morning to evening. Sections of the panorama have become notably popular through derivations in almost every kind of medium and in restaurant décor. I needed to look it up when Craig Clunas, my successor as Professor at Oxford, patiently answered my importunate question as to which is the most famous painting in China. This testifies to my (and I think our) general ignorance of Chinese culture. With the rebirth of China as a political, economic, and cultural power, it may be that Zhang Zeduan's masterpiece will assume its warranted prominence on a worldwide basis.

Even without venturing into what for me would be exotic territories, the range covered by the chapters is very wide, from early Christian evidence of the appearance of Christ to the abstract and counter-intuitive complexities of twentieth-century relativity. Inevitably I am more secure in my knowledge and understanding of some of my topics than others. I have been fortunate that friends with special expertise have been willing to look at the whole or parts of chapters. It would, however, be surprising if some bloomers have not crept through, but I hope that none undermines the arguments of each chapter and of the book as a whole.

The range of material would not have been manageable in practice during the era before the internet. I can, for instance, search the US Patents Office on-line for COCA-COLA bottle designs without the expense, time, and rigours of a journey to Washington. Major archives are increasingly appearing on-line, like the excellent and freely accessible records of the Ava Helen and Linus Pauling papers in Oregon State University, the generous accessibility of which stands in contrast to the more prescriptive and commercial management of the Einstein archive at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Separating the wheat from the chaff on the internet involves much the same skills of evaluation that the historian has always needed, but these skills need refining and fortifying in the face of the apparently authentic rubbish that looks so plausible in many websites. It seems to me that one of the biggest jobs for education today is to educate everyone, young people in particular, about the necessary skills in questioning and evaluation in the digital age. Spurious material can now be readily and freely

presented with a visual and verbal conviction that is hugely dangerous. My own widespread use of internet sources accounts for the cluster of links to websites at the start of each chapter's list of readings. Academics still tend to be rather snifty about citing such sources. If they are good and provide access to something special, they deserve to be credited.

One of the hazards in writing about such famous images is that media 'stories' erupt so frequently that the book can all too easily appear to be outdated before it is published. During advanced stages in the production of the book the 'original recipe' for COCA-COLA appeared, accompanied by much media excitement. Typically, the scoop was not all it seemed. The list of ingredients was written by a friend of the inventor and had appeared, obscurely published, some years before. It is unclear if it was the definitive recipe for the original drink. It certainly is not the formula used in the present concoction. With iconic images even damp squibs tend to become jumping firecrackers.

I am conscious that the approach and style is not always that expected of a sober university professor, especially one who is now retired from a full-time post. There is an overtly personal dimension to the book, not least in the opening sections of each chapter, which consciously exploit an 'eyewitness' dimension. This seemed appropriate and felt right as I was drafting the chapters, not least because the images are very close to us and are living components of the visual fabric of our contemporary world, even if they originated a long ago. They evoke personal reactions and associations often of a powerful kind, sometimes positive, sometimes negative. Indeed they would not be iconic if they failed to engage us. The subject of some of the episodes, most notably those involved with war but also those that concern overtly funny incidents, involve reactions that it would have seemed stilled to suppress. My prose has been stretched into realms of potential expression into which it has not ventured on previous occasions. Only the reader can decide if it has been stretched beyond its breaking point.

Fuzzy Formulas

THIS WAS TO BE A CONCLUSION, and it still is to a degree. However, for reasons that will become clear, it is very much not conclusive, and I am therefore finishing with a concluding chapter rather than a conclusion as such.

Do iconic images have anything in common? This is the question I posed and partly dismissed in the Introduction. We can now rephrase the question more specifically in relation to what has come in between. If the eleven examples are a reasonably representative selection of types of iconic image, what do they share in common? Again I would say it rests on a false or at least unproven premiss, that is to say it assumes that one iconic image *necessarily* has anything in common at all with another. Or we can refine the premiss to read: iconic images necessarily share a certain set of key or essential features if they are to achieve the highest status.

tain set
we can
iconic
on a fa
iconic
the elev
the que
posed
Do i
as such
am the
rea
THIS

Only two of our icons are predominantly religious, Christ and the cross. The heart also has a conspicuous religious dimension. Does this mean that the other eight are secular? If by secular we mean not specifically attached to an organized body of beliefs and practices in a particular religion, the answer is fairly obviously yes. But if we extend our notion of the religious to embrace devotion that accords a value to something that transcends all its apparent physical existence, then the other eight all exhibit either religious or quasi-religious dimensions.

The Stars and Stripes, so linked to the Christian foundations of America, probably is the most religious of the apparently secular images. It has become a kind of sacramental object through both law and custom. However, none of the others lacks a strong devotional component that expresses itself through acts of worship of one kind or another. The lion, for instance, often stands for the divine attribute of majesty, as accorded to absolute rulers, heroes who have been immortalized, or state entities that aspire to transcend the individual. No one who has witnessed the elbow-ing crowds in the front of the *Mona Lisa* can doubt that 'she' is the subject of cultural worship and journeys of pilgrimages (Fig. 12.1).

Merely having been in the presence of the original has a special value, almost independently of the viewing conditions that do not provide a close visual experience of the painting as a physical reality. The fusion of Che and Christ is readily apparent. The naked Kim Phuc is an innocent massacred or at least tortured, like the infants slaughtered on the order of Herod, and her pose carries echoes of the scourged Christ. The age-old quest for the 'secret' of life is embodied by DNA, a special kind of scientific icon that has in some minds supplanted God as the origin of life.

Celebrity and Presence

As will become clear later, I still think this premiss, even in its refined form, is untenable.

There are two main dimensions to the achieving of iconic status; the fame of the subject or content of the thing represented or signified; and the memorable look of the image or sign. It must be the case that these two factors act in total concert with the most enduring visual icons, but for the purpose of an analysis it will be useful to separate them out. The issue of content is somewhat easier, at least in terms of the kind of arguments we can use. Let us begin with this.

refined
itus; the
ied; and
at these
ons, but
out. The
of argu-

he cross.
his mean
ically at-
ular reli-
nition of
hing that
ght all ex-

of Amer-
images. It
l custom.
at that ex-
e lion, for
corded to
tities that
he elbow-
he subject

cial value,
provide a
fusion of
innocent
the order
he age-old
ind of sci-
gin of life.



$E = mc^2$ plays a comparable role at a cosmic rather than human scale, and is locked into both the greatest things that human genius can achieve (in the person of Einstein) and the greatest destructive evils it can perpetrate (in terms of the bomb). The COCA-COLA bottle is perhaps the least easy to characterize in religious terms, without debasing the term 'religious' to embrace such things as the worship of material consumption, an Americanized lifestyle, and the cult of youth—coupled with a fierce devotion to a particular brand as a form of individual and collective identity. However, The New Seekers did provide a hymn to COKE: 'I'd like to teach the world to sing | In perfect harmony...'

We all tend to accord value to things that transcend any kind of financial and utilitarian worth. Recently my fountain pen was severely chewed by a seat in the lecture theatre at St John's College in Oxford. It fell into the hinge and when the seat was pressed down to see if it had dropped onto the floor the mechanism crushed its stout steel barrel. It has been resuscitated, albeit with some residual scarring, by a local jeweller, Julia Beusch.

Fig. 12.1

Matthew Landrus, *Mona Lisa under Siege*, 2001.

Why all this trouble for a pen of the kind that can still be purchased quite readily? The answer is that it was given to me by my son Jonathan, inscribed with my name. I have used it for many years and renewed its in-

nards. It has what is called 'sentimental value'—a rather unsatisfactory phrase that glosses over the kinds of identity involved in something like my pen. It has a kind of presence—something I am saying as someone not generally prone to mystical and religious beliefs.

All the iconic images are endowed with a special presence, as if some quality of the original is embedded in them. Looking is only part of it. When the image is realized in a physical form that we can possess, the artefact in its own right assumes some kind of status that goes beyond it being a representation. I think we would be worried to find that we had accidentally created a page in a well-illustrated book in such a way that it 'detached' the *Mona Lisa*. Duchamp understood exactly this when he added the moustache and beard. Perhaps a narrative image, like the photograph of the running Kim, least readily turns into an icon that embeds presence. However, Leonardo's *Last Supper*, Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, and Picasso's *Guernica* show that narratives are not entirely resistant to assuming the status of revered images rather than remaining illustrations. The dividing line is not absolute. An *Annunciation* can be a devotional image on an altar and a narrative in a fresco cycle of the Virgin's life, but Fra Angelico can paint the Angel greeting Mary in a monk's cell in S. Marco in Florence in a way that tells the story and functions as a contemplative image of the Virgin Annunciate, embodying the essence of her immaculate nature. It is precisely this transfer of the real presence from the subject of devotion to the representation that has raised the ire of iconoclasts in all those religions that have always or for a time rejected figurative images of deities and revered followers.

In the more modern period the concept of icon has become entangled in the cult of celebrity, which tends to be characterized as a shallow re-placement of spiritual values by a superficial worship of transitory qualities via the media. Again I do not think there is a sharp division. All iconic images must acquire the property of celebrity, but not all celebrities are icons, above all in the longer term.

There have been a number of attempts to define the beginning of celebrity culture. The rise of mass popular entertainment in Britain in the later eighteenth century, the advent of photography on a mass scale, the rise of film and then television, and the internet have all been seen as marking

special b
I tend to
arena of
The sp
able start
limestone
ily from
kind, also
having o
ent evide
can sens
achieved
Museum
the gran
the hum

special beginnings. Historians like breaks, changes, and beginnings, but I tend to see basic human continuities as predominantly at work in the arena of enduring celebrity.

The specific subject here, the icon, certainly is not subject to any definable starting point. It is difficult to argue that the Willendorf 'Venus', the limestone statuette in which a woman's naked body is composed primarily from the more bulbous parts of her physique, is not an icon of some kind, along with a number of such figures (Fig. 12.2). It is generally seen having originated some 25,000 years ago. Although there is no independent evidence of its role, beyond the appearance of the statuette itself, we can sense that it always was intended as an iconic object, and it has now achieved a high level of worldwide fame. If it was in the Kunsthistorisches Museum rather than that devoted to Natural History, on the other side of the grand avenue in Vienna, it might well be even more iconic. Images of the human body, or the divine in human-like form, have been central to

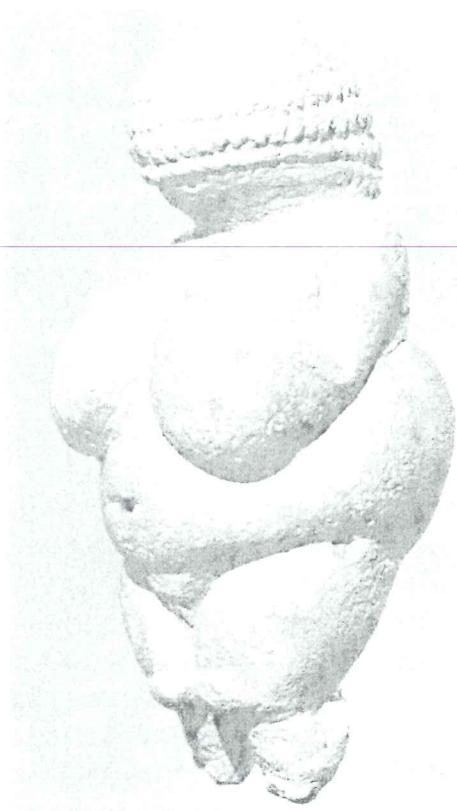


Fig. 12.2

The 'Venus' of Willendorf,
c.23,000 BC, Vienna,
Naturhistorisches Museum.

many religions, and the emphasis in the 'Venus' upon those anatomical features in which women most differ from men feeds our alertness to primary sexual characteristics. It clearly plugs into some pretty basic visual and conceptual instincts.

There are undeniable signs that the celebrity of some modern celebrities is surviving beyond their apparently passing prominence in the media of mass consumption. In 2005 the National Portrait Gallery in London launched an exhibition on *The World's Most Photographed*. Ten subjects (not eleven) were identified: Muhammad Ali, James Dean, Mahatma Gandhi, Greta Garbo, Audrey Hepburn, Adolf Hitler, John F. Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, and Queen Victoria. The show of 100 or so photographs was coupled with a television series. It is notable that only one is still alive, the boxer Muhammad Ali, who sadly is in little state to promote his own cult. It is clear that to move from being a celebrity for the time (enjoying Andy Warhol's 15 minutes of fame) into the realm of a more enduring fame requires the attraction of a cult following on a widespread basis that outlives the subject themselves. They need in some way to embody something greater than their individual characteristics. They need to become representative, in a way comparable to deities or saints who have become associated with particular facets of life, redemption, and eternity. Ali is a kind of Hercules, Dean a youthful martyr like St Sebastian, Gandhi a Christ-like saint of non-violent action, Garbo, Hepburn, and Monroe are Juno, Pallas, and Venus, awaiting the Judgement of Paris, and Presley is the Joshua whose trumpeting voice tumbled the walls of adulthood, while the assassinated Kennedy is a modern King Arthur ruling over his court of Camelot, and Hitler is an obvious Satan. Queen Victoria would probably not feature on any list outside England. There is obviously an element of overstatement in my identifications, but the analogies do have a certain level of validity in terms of the archetypes involved.

The serial reproduction of images of the saints and celebrities, ancient and modern, has been characterized by Walter Benjamin as diminishing their 'aura'. The reverse is true. Any widespread broadcasting of fame ensures that the embodying of a special presence in the original is enormously enhanced. The democratizing of images has resulted in the canonical subjects and their images becoming ever more exclusive from and elevated above the common herd. We are all familiar with images of teenagers' bedrooms adorned with posters and pages cut roughly from magazines. The bedrooms become, as has often been remarked, shrines

to the teenagers we all create things of the bioid can character as a 'survive' ins has ev in the gen demonstrate can affirm analogy de active and romment c the design defined er ing. Even t be seen as difference some or : putting a to insulat be viable in posh S and even In the pray in h mission of image tutions, mission: ed mate However transmits Rather t such a w much su example

to the teenagers' personal saints. Adults may be less blatant, but I suspect we all create spaces or arrays of cherished possessions that share something of the quality of shrines.

The biologist Richard Dawkins and his followers have claimed that we can characterize the survival of something iconic in Darwinian terms—as a 'survival of the fittest' in the jungle of cultural competition. Dawkins has even applied a specific name, the 'meme', to the unit involved in the genetics of culture. Inasmuch as an iconic image has manifestly demonstrated its fitness for survival in changing contexts over time, we can affirm that the biological analogy works well enough. However, the analogy does not go all that far once we realize that we are dealing with active and purposeful agents rather than chance mutations and an environment of physical causes and effects. For example, those involved with the design of the Stars and Stripes did so according to a series of clearly defined ends in an environment that they were themselves actively shaping. Even the most teleological form of Darwin's natural selection cannot be seen as analogous to such processes. There is also another important difference. Icons transgress original form, function, and context so that some or most of the original fitness criteria no longer apply. It is like putting a polar bear in the tropics and finding that its white coat helps to insulate from the rays of the sun. Nonetheless, the bear is unlikely to be viable in searing heat. The 'commie' Che somehow needs to survive in posh Sloane Square. His 'fitness for survival' is clearly of a very elastic and even paradoxical kind.

In the chapter on Che we encountered the cultural theorist Régis Debray in his Bolivian prison, and noted how he came to emphasize 'transmission' rather than just the thing in itself. I described his cultural analysis of images as embracing all the media, mechanisms, technologies, institutions, materials, rituals, conventions, and the circumstances of transmission in and across time. There is nothing very biological in the varied material mechanisms and transformations of form that are involved. However, there are clearly some central perceptual and cognitive mechanisms at work in a way that transcends the particularities of the media of transmission. The medium is not the whole message, as Debray thought. Rather the message somehow seeps through its media transformations in such a way that some aspects of a recognizable core still survive, however much subverted. This core obviously survives in visual form in our eleven examples, and it is to the visual characteristics that we now turn.

Visual Cores

We might hope or even expect that such iconic images as we have described here would share some memorable visual features in common. Some common features are evident, and can indeed be observed commonly if not uniformly. They are a strong element of symmetry and the kind of simplicity that allows us to seize upon the key identifiers. In the case of human heads, the eyes and mouth are in the lead, as Dante recognized, while in the case of some icons, such as the heart, the images have been reduced to these minimal identifying features already. Iconic images often exhibit extraordinary robustness however inadequately they are transmitted or however they are traded during transcription. This robustness is something that Warhol infallibly identified (Fig. 12.3). His *Twelve White Mona Lisas* demonstrates how far the process of reduction can go without losing the essential signs of resemblance. Not only is the image reduced to a few basics, it has been rendered as a negative, reversing the darks and lights. Warhol was also very alert to the way in which some famous images make superb repeats, that is to say they can be laid out effectively like a repeating wallpaper pattern.

Warhol remained a pious Catholic in the Polish tradition, even during the years of his apparent excesses, and was brought up with popular images of Christ, the Virgin, and saints, and with devotional paintings and sculptures in church. Having grown accustomed to traditional religious icons as a child, the adult Warhol became the genie of a new set of modern popular icons. He shaped himself into a manufacturer of iconic images in serial repetitions, whether he is capturing the brittle glamour of Marilyn Monroe or the sinister darkness of the electric chair. The icons are being iconized. It is entirely in keeping with this creation of images in the devotional style that he should have turned late in his life to serial versions of Leonardo's *Last Supper*.

Amongst the so-called Pop Artists of Warhol's generation, Jim Dine has performed this role for the heart shape, in an extended series of graphic works, paintings, and sculptures since the mid-1960s. More generally Pop Art has been heavily engaged with sets of basic images in the public domain that retain their visual potency, however much they are bowdlerized and traduced.

We have, then, some reasonably promising criteria, which involve some measures of symmetry, simplicity, basic recognizability, resistance to poor replication, and the making of good repeats. However, not all the

images a
lyse it ac
complex
of it
exhibit a
(as is co
doesn't v

ved
m-
uni-
city
uds,
e of
ini-
ary
hey
ar-
ates
gns
een
ery
hat
n.
ing
im-
and
ous
od-
im-
r of
ons
ges
rial

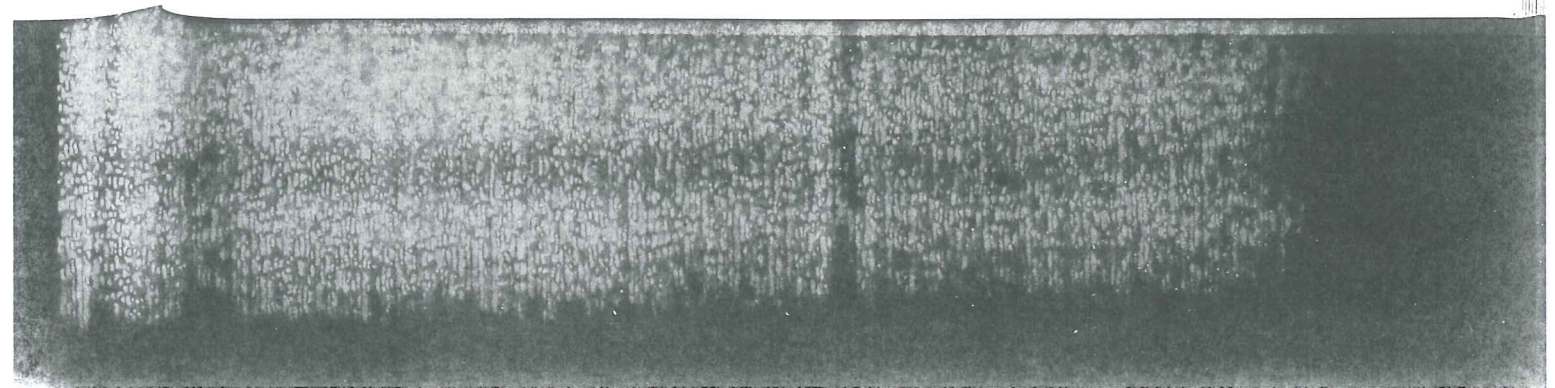
has
hic
Pop
do-
zed

olve
ince
the

images are symmetrical and simple. Nick Ut's photograph, even if we analyse it according to the Renaissance rules described by Alberti, presents a complex and not very symmetrical pictorial field with a number of centres of interest. Lions do of course have certain bilateral symmetries and exhibit a simple set of identifiers, but they can be portrayed from the side (as is common) and without obvious pictorial symmetries. And $E = mc^2$ doesn't work at all according to symmetry or the making of good repeats.

Fig. 12.3.

Andy Warhol, *Twelve White Mona Lisas*, 1980, private collection.

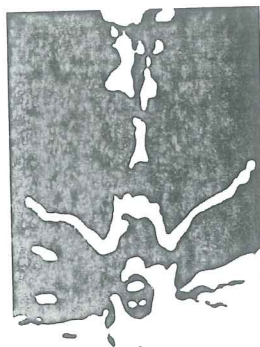


Thinking that the Vietnam photograph is the most complex of the images and least likely to survive severe degradation, I subjected it to the 'stamp' feature in Adobe Photoshop. This reduces the image so that it becomes simplified like a rubber stamp with darks and lights inverted, across a potential range from moderate to extreme. I found that it resisted degeneration surprisingly well (Fig. 12.4). The strongly silhouetted contours of the figures in the original—Kim herself is picked out in dark and light tones against a pale grey background—are clearly important. The running girl in the 'stamped' version remains very striking, reduced to a trembling cross-shape. Her brother and the two children hand in hand remain surprisingly legible. However, it is her body-form that attracts our curiosity. It remains supremely eloquent of something out of the ordinary, as the cropped version shows (Fig. 12.5). Indeed, we refer to Nick Ut's image as the photograph of a napalmed girl, rather than of a fleeing family. It is a photograph of her.

To test how another moderately complex but non-iconic image in a semi-symmetrical photograph would react to the 'stamping' process, I chose a quite casually taken snapshot by my son from May 2008 of my daughter's sons Etienne and Louis, and my son's daughter Alice (Figs 12.6 and 12.7). There is some composition involved, but nothing sophisticated.

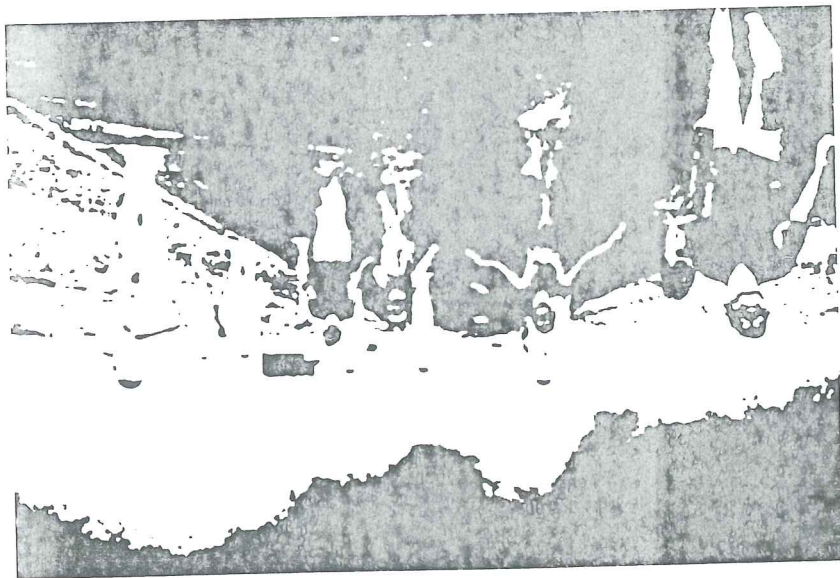
Kim Phuc in the Stamp version, cropped.

Fig. 12.5



Nick Ut's photograph of the napalmed girl, transformed by the Stamp feature in Adobe Photoshop.

Fig. 12.4



It is
reaches
Indeed
ice ren
remain
(Fig. 12
origin: b
have b



Fig. 12.6

Jonathan Kemp, *Etienne, Louis, and Alice*, May 2008.

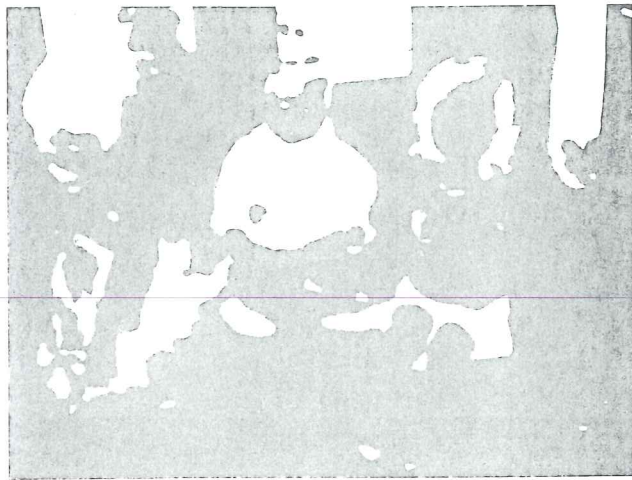


Fig. 12.7

The Stamp version of *Etienne, Louis, and Alice*, May 2010.

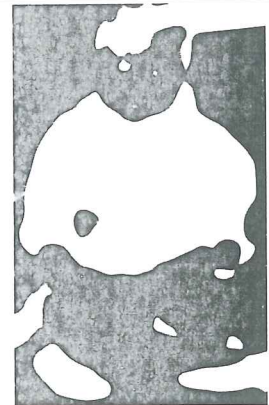


Fig. 12.8

Louis in the Stamp version, cropped, 2010.

It is immediately apparent that the complex pose of Etienne, as he reaches down to play with a rubber octopus, does not transmit legibly. Indeed, something like a cat has emerged, pawing at Louis's right leg. Alice remains discernible as a little girl, courtesy of her skirt and hair. Louis remains the closest to the original, with even a trace of his infant stare (Fig. 12.8). It takes a lot of effort to unravel the man's disembodied legs originally visible to the right of Alice. Perhaps the image of Louis would have become iconic if he had written *War and Peace* as an infant.

In the case of iconic images, let us imagine a field in which we distribute those factors that we deem to be effective in promoting the various kinds of images to the top status (Fig. 12.9). In my diagrammatic field, there is no spatial separation between historical-cum-social factors, such as political significance and worldwide fame, and the kind of visual characteristics we have outlined, since they interact in complex and dynamic

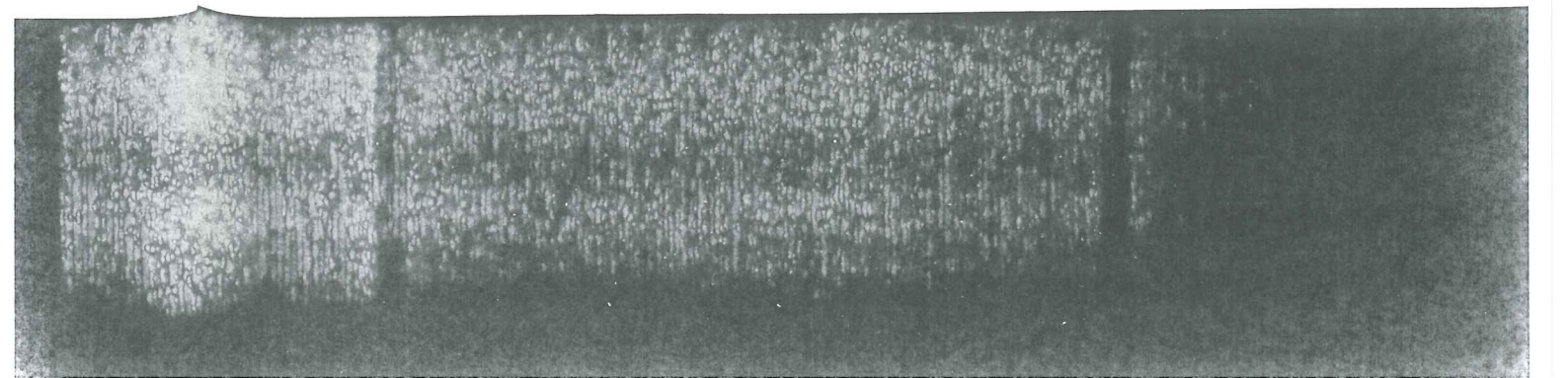
know it when we see it in a given context. tidily agreed nor subject to any neatly definable rules, but we generally tion of 'Art' is essentially like this. What is and what is not 'Art' is neither thermometer with the reading 'too hot' on it. It seems to me that the definition of 'too hot' and it is a useful category, but it is difficult to deal with it in a clear-cut and systematic manner. There is no weather is too hot'. We have no difficulty in practice navigating through all the kinds and degrees of 'too hot' and it is a useful category, but it is to touch, the untidiness is even more pronounced. Even more so with the what it means. If we apply the category 'too hot' to how hot the plate is nition of what belongs in that category is untidy, even though we know food is 'too hot' for me. Thus, if we have a category of 'too hot', the definition of what belongs in that category is untidy, even though we know food much hotter than that, but not as hot as some people like it. Their

to a discernible degree. He is told that is not too hot—to no avail. I like my of my grandsons rejects food as 'too hot' if it is above room temperature outside strict membership conditions. Let us take a simple example. One ship are open to dispute. It can also embrace looser associations that lie have broadly agreed characteristics but whose boundaries and membership cannot be made. Fuzziness can handle categories that are identifiable and with situations in which absolute definitions, inclusions, and exclusions tion of fuzziness in set and group theory has been developed to cope tures in images. It is probably best called fuzzy category theory. The no- theory that I have developed to handle clusters of visual and social fea- I should like to propose that we can, using an odd variant of fuzzy group

Fuzzy Categories

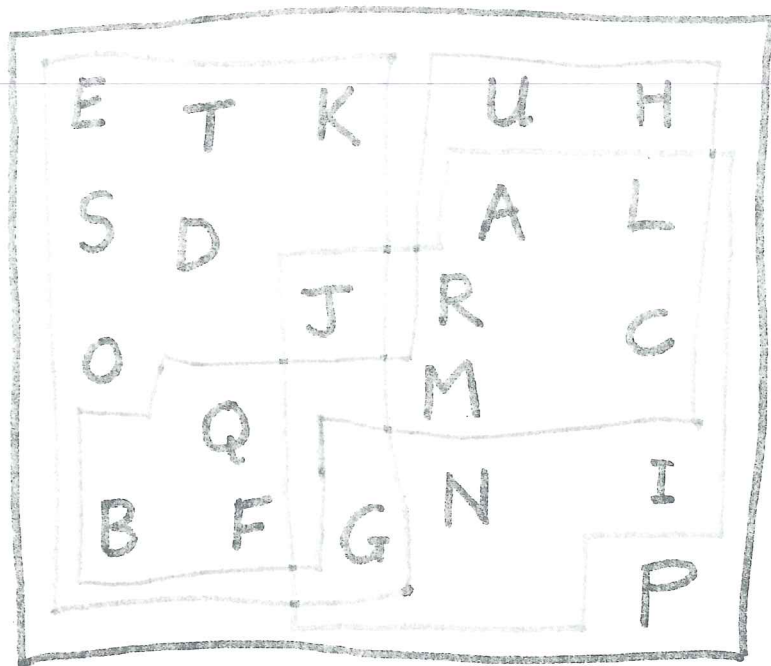
Some common threads are emerging, not least the robustness of the images when severely transformed, but I still think they are well short of becoming defining characteristics. I think we are dealing with helpful tendencies in the more pictorial of the items rather than a fixed set of necessary properties that covers all of them. Can we go beyond this rather feeble conclusion?

ways. I is ineffi ardo w adjacent in factors be dell identify erratic about r possibly in. The set of f green t appear solely but it r other i



ways. It is easy to imagine an image of something extremely famous that is ineffective, while Lisa Gherardini was not famous at all, though Leonardo was and is. Sometimes the interactions will be most powerful with adjacent factors; sometimes the linking factors will just happen to be situated in remote parts of the field. Nor is there any strict ranking, though factors that we feel to be more significant, such as visual robustness, will be deliberately clustered towards the centre. I am not attempting here to identify the actual factor denoted by each of the twenty letters distributed erratically across the field. Rather I am demonstrating a mode of thinking about the category 'iconic image'. The proposal I am making is that it is possible to have three or more things that belong more or less indisputably in the category but do not necessarily share any particular factor or set of factors in common.

There are three groups of letters (or factors), eleven enclosed by the green border, ten by the blue, and nine by the red. There is no letter that appears in all three, which means that no factor can be deemed to be absolutely necessary. Poor P, in the bottom right corner, is not in any group, but it must be there because it has been identified as a common factor in other iconic images, outside the given three. K, for instance, features in



12.9

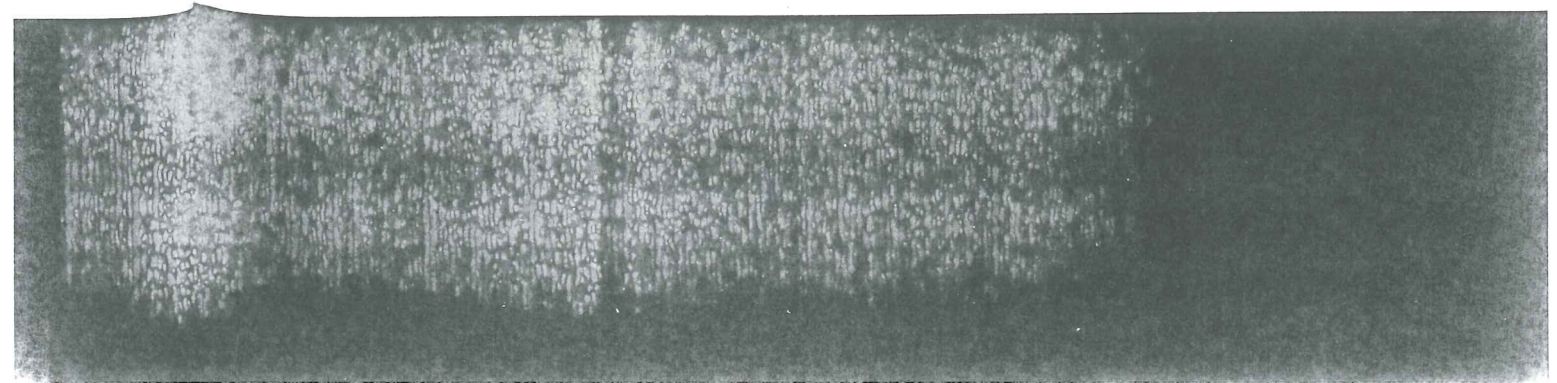
Fuzzy category field, with green, blue, and red groups, 2010.

only the green, while J is shared with red. E and H look a bit marginal, included only once and located at the edge of the field, but they could potentially figure powerfully with other marginal factors in conjunction with a very few of the more central factors in another iconic set. The red group includes less than half of the letters, but is strongly represented by the central factors. It would be possible to undertake a precise analysis of the various combinations of nine, ten, and eleven letters, but I want to retain a central element of subjective perception rather than resorting to mathematical theory.

I am envisaging a situation in which we instinctively recognize that the green, blue, and red groups are all readily identifiable as being members of the category of iconic images, without having any *necessarily* shared factors or critical number of factors. I also envisage that each group itself, with its defined factors, might well be associated more loosely with other factors outside its boundaries, but without these other factors being drawn decisively within the boundaries of the group. What looks like a relatively weak set might be given a great boost from powerful associated factors outside the category. For instance, it is clearly not necessary for an image to be considered an artistic masterpiece (only the *Mona Lisa* obviously qualifies amongst our eleven) but it can be a hugely significant factor for an image that also belongs in the category 'Work of Art'. The chapters, we may recall, were chosen in relation to different types or categories, and each of these brings its own particular set of associations. We are dealing with a complex interweaving and permutation of major and secondary factors, with associated tertiary ones, without a single formula being operative in defining which factors infallibly make an iconic image. Thus we can argue that symmetry is a very common property, but it is not apparent in the Stars and Stripes. Robustness is however a powerful factor with the American flag, even to the point that a fragment including a star and stripe or two would be unmistakable. A fragment of the heart would need to contain enough hints about the shape, such as the central dip, to tell us what it is. But the broad expanse of sky in Nick Ut's photograph would not speak of the whole to a useful degree.

It is certainly possible to extract a list of factors from the above discussions. It runs something like this (not excluding the possibility that I have missed something important); a famous subject; a link to powerful factors; a broad, rich, and flexible set of associations; a broadly representative function; personal and even emotional engagement; human

signifi-
materi-
ject; r-
produ-
How
ing, m-
tory fo-
body e-
predic-
hibit v-
And
On 8
An
is st-
tus;
cou-
mo-
Coc
use
I won-
seems
Read
R. Dye
R. How
F. Ingh-
J. Mor-
R. Mu-
M. Sm-
l



significance; the focus of a cult; a sense of presence that goes beyond its material existence; a measure of symmetry; simplicity of the main subject; tonal and colouristic clarity; robustness in the face of degraded reproduction; making good repeats; recognizable in fragmentary form.

However, the reader might guess that I am rather resistant to such listing, not least because such a list can too easily congeal into an explanatory formula. I do not think that an image consciously composed to embody all the factors would necessarily become iconic. There is no absolute predictability—just a series of extraordinary stories about images that exhibit varied kinds of shared and individual characteristics.

And Finally

On 8 April 2007 Reuters News Agency reported:

An Italian film '7 km from Jerusalem' about an advertising executive who is soul searching after losing his job and marriage and runs into Jesus in Jerusalem sparked protest from the Coca-Cola Company. As a result, the film could not premier over Easter weekend as the film maker had planned. The movie showed Jesus drinking a can of COCA-COLA. The Italian division of the Coca-Cola Company demanded that the scene be edited out stating that the use of its brand was unacceptable.

I wonder whose image is being protected here? Christ or COKE? Neither seems to need it.

Reading

- R. Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, London, 2004.
R. Howells, 'Heroes, Saints and Celebrities: The Photograph as Holy Relic', *Celebrity Studies*, 2/2, July 2011: 112–30.
F. Inglis, *A Short History of Celebrity*, Princeton, 2010.
J. Mordenson, K Butani, and A. Rosenfeld, *Fuzzy Group Theory*, New York, 2005.
R. Muir (ed.), *The World's Most Photographed*, London, National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2005.
M. Smithson and J. Verkuilen, *Fuzzy Set Theory: Applications in the Social Sciences*, London, 2006.