ways comes at a cost—usually the cost of reproducing other inequities and
deferring other problems. To look back and only see the costs is not simply
one-sided, it is to overlook a mediating process by which the society func-
tions and changes. As Warner advises, the critic must not miss "the ten-
sion inherent in the form" of public address, which "goes well beyond any
strategy of domination." The significant entailment is that the ideologi-
cal implications of specific texts or images are necessary but not sufficient for
understanding how public address fulfills the interrelated functions of con-
structing public identity and motivating political behavior.

Iconic photographs provide the public audience with "equipment for
living" as a public. They provide important resources for political action
that do not fit neatly within either the idealized norms of public reason or
the mechanisms of political domination. So it is that one needs the "multi-
leveled analysis" that is "always demanded of public texts." Critical study
must grant the iconoclasts their due, but there is much more to be done. We
hope to show how iconic images contribute to the coproduction of political
meaning that occurs throughout a modern, liberal-democratic society. More
to the point, by looking carefully at the leading photographs in U.S. public
life, perhaps the reader can see what potential liberal democracy has for nur-
turing social justice and the common good.

THE BORDERS OF THE GENRE

MIGRANT MOTHER AND THE TIMES SQUARE KISS

Had you been strolling through Best Buy in the summer of 2005, you might
have seen a display of Samsonite Worldproof camera bags. Behind one of
the racks for the bags there was a grainy reproduction of a gaunt woman hold-
ing one child while two others clutch her as they turn away from the camera.
Later known as the "Migrant Mother," she stares wearily, anxiously into the
grim poverty of America's Great Depression. Behind the second rack another
image depicted a brash sailor clutching a graceful nurse in a passionate em-
brace as they celebrate VJ Day. Dubbed the "Times Square Kiss," the image
captures the joyful return of a world where uniforms, rationing, and dying
will all fall away.

The display announced that the bags were "Dedicated to the World's Photo-
journalists." And for good reason:

To the photojournalist, life is a series of split seconds. The path of history
changes in the flush of an expression, an assassin's bullet, a goal scored in over-
time. Once captured, the most powerful of these images become icons that de-
fine an era and add immeasurable meaning to our lives. We honor photojourn-
nalists worldwide and their perseverance in the face of arrest, imprisonment, and even death.

One might question whether scoring a goal is the equivalent of an assassination or how history could be redirected by a change of expression, but only if you are on the outside of the culture of popular media and retail consumption. The camera that records change of expression, personalities, politics, and sports are standard categories of visual news coverage; and retail decision making is nothing if it is not trafficking in images that can become tokens of personal identification. Nor should it be surprising that the intrepid photojournalists are nowhere to be seen. In an age of mechanical reproduction, artists and audiences alike are articulated primarily as experiential anchors for the images themselves, which acquire a cultural currency largely independent of the circumstances of either their production or their reception. And so it is that the display tells us of the "immeasurable meaning" of these images, a magnitude of response too great to be specified. The retailer is banking on the excessive value, mystery, and desire of commodity fetishism, while offering a world of meaning that remains mute.

Samosomite is there to help, however, and so one might read the text accompanying the photo stationed behind the first of the two bags on display:

Photo by Dorotha Lange. Migrant Mother. 1936. Lange was arguably the greatest photojournalist of the Thirties. Her shots of poverty-stricken migrants came to symbolize the great depression.

Then, the next bag:

Photo by Victor Jorgensen. Kissing Strangers. 1945. Jorgensen covered the war as part of Edward Steichen's elite corps. His shot in Times Square during the celebration of Japan's surrender came to symbolize the nation's embrace of peace time.

Great pictures, no doubt about it, but not from events that in any way threatened the photographers with "arrest, imprisonment, and even death." And who is Victor Jorgensen? Wasn't the famous photograph of the "Times Square Kiss" taken by Alfred Eisenstaedt? It was, but that photo is owned by Time-Life and available only for a hefty fee. The shot by Navy photographer Jorgensen was taken from a different angle at the same time, and since then it has lived a shadow existence as the public domain stand-in for the image made famous by Life magazine. This sleight of hand is emblematic of the paradoxical nature of the visual icon: what is assumed to be a single, transparent image is in fact something closer to an afterimage. There usually are multiple versions of the "original" involving small alterations in angle or distance, and there always are variant crops and differences in the size of the reproductions, which also are shown both in black and white and in color and given multiple captions in diverse media. Yet, despite a thousand variations introduced through the reproduction and circulation of these images, they remain fixed as if they were a single moment of visual truth, so much so that all the circumstances of their production and initial presentation become merely items for captioning, unstable and ultimately dispensable.

The iconic images are the dominant signs in this example, capable of both generating the accompanying narrative and cancelling its contradictions and distortions. They are chosen for reproduction because they are iconic, and their placement there continues the process of circulation through which they acquire their distinctive status. Nor is the captioning entirely specious: the descriptions are on target regarding both the definition of the genre and the meaning of the specific images. Much remains to be said, however, and one can start by asking why these two images might be paired together. Poverty is one thing and jubilant celebration another. A woman burdened with responsibility and want might be the consequence of two strangers coupling during a wild party, but she is not the obvious companion to such a scene. Although one typically would purchase only one camera bag—perhaps even to carry a camera—it seems odd that anyone would choose that grim portrait of want unless it is already evocative of a larger understanding of the iconic image. The consumer is purchasing a camera bag and an image and something more: perhaps a collective memory of, say, "an American Century," perhaps also personal association with the power of documentary photography.

The somewhat incidental pairing of the two iconic images on the retailer's rack is richly evocative in a way that goes beyond the ironies noted above: by examining these two images in conjunction with one another, one can identify the borders of the genre. If the Samsonite ad seems a cheapening of the images, it is only because they meet high standards of formal composition. In each photo (figs. 1 and 6 below) one can observe classical symmetries, sharp contrasts of light and shadow, and powerful vectors of compression or expansion—witness the tension in the lines of the mother's face and the vibrant movement up the street into the space and light of Times Square. In each we also see the evocation of powerful symbolic forms: Madonna and Child in the stable, as well as the deep humanity of Renaissance portraiture; the romantic swoon ritualized in classical ballet, ballroom dancing, and Hollywood film, as well as the exciting social turbulence and semiotic excess of the carnival. These artistic allusions work in concert with the
norms of photojournalism; we see collective events depicted via representative individuals, a carefully controlled disclosure of private relationships within a public medium, social actors offered for view rather than directly confronting the viewer, and no evident artistic manipulation of the image, which then appears as a transparent window on reality. Each photograph also draws on the dominant ideological structures of its time: women are acted upon, rather than acting; relations of class are masked by portraits of individuals; race is effaced as the world worth seeing appears to be a white world. The images also provide a visual incarnation of the most powerful tensions of the historical period: the terrible and devastating struggles with poverty and war, the contradictions between capitalism and community and between collective security and individual happiness. The two photographs also seem to complement one another to frame a mythic narrative: despair is transformed into hope; individual vulnerability is replaced by bending and celebration; natural scarcity and emotional desolation are displaced by soaring spirits that break through public inhibitions. That’s not a bad story, nor is it far from a good script for a blockbuster movie.

These two images also trace a national narrative of the odyssey from Great Depression to victory culture and so of the “American Century” in all its glory. Each has become a significant signpost in collective memory—for example, when a huge reproduction of the “Migrant Mother” stands as the only visual image of the depression in a century timeline displayed in the foyer of the Museum of Westward Expansion in St. Louis, Missouri. Each may be capable of activating the narrative as a whole—as when the Eisenstaedt print is the cover image for the Life retrospective, The Way We Were: Decades of the Twentieth Century. Their power surely comes in part from the extent to which each depicts crucial phases of this story in a single image, and they share other similarities, as we shall see. Yet these common features acquire additional power and inflection from the differences between the two images. The two photographs present negative and positive images of the common people, a feeling of anxiety and one of celebration, an appeal for action and a model for imitation, a resource for dissent and one for affirmation, and other alternatives for invention and inference as well. The triumphant story they tell together may serve as one of the borders of the genre, one of the constraints that iconic representation has to observe or at least negotiate artfully. The aesthetic alternatives they embody fill out the genre’s outline more fully. These alternatives, as well as their varied political functions, are the means by which the iconic image can represent and be used to manage the tensions of liberal-democratic public culture. Consider each photograph in its turn.

Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” (fig. 1) was photographed in February 1936 in a pea pickers’ camp in Nipomo, California, while on assignment as a photographer for the Resettlement Administration (RA), which soon would become the better-known Farm Security Administration (FSA). As Lange told the story years later, the decision to stop at the pea pickers’ camp was fortuitous. She was driving home after a month in the field when she happened upon a sign identifying the camp. She tried to ignore the sign and drive on, but after twenty miles she was compelled to return to the camp, “following instinct, not reason.” She shot six photographs of the woman and members of her family in a very short period of time, starting at a distance and working her way closer and closer after the fashion of a portrait photographer. Her photos first appeared in the San Francisco News on March 10, 1936, as part of a story demanding relief for the starving pea pickers. The feature was a success; relief was organized, and there is no record of death by starvation. This story of the photo’s origin and impact is, of course, a bit too good. Every icon acquires a standard narrative and often others as well. The standard narrative includes a myth of origin, a tale of public uptake or impact, and a quest for the actual people in the picture to provide closure for the larger social drama captured by the image. In this case, the photo’s origin is due to serendipity, not routine or craft. There is no mention of Lange’s government subsidy nor of the fact that the photo was retouched to remove the woman’s thumb in the lower right corner. Most tellingly, it slides over the fact that the iconic photo was not actually shown in the San Francisco News until the day following the original story. The photo acquires significance as Lange becomes a poetic vehicle for the operation of historical forces; by mobilizing public opinion, the photographer provides the impetus to collective action. The star illustration of moving somebody to do something is ‘Migrant Mother.’

As was the custom among RA/FSA photographers who were trying to adhere to scientific method, her notes record no names but they do feature socioeconomic categories such as “destitute pea pickers” and “mother of seven children.” The picture itself needs no such help to draw on the prior decades of documentary photography. Direct exposure of ordinary, anonymous, working-class people engaged in the basic tasks of everyday life amidst degraded circumstances was the template of the social reform photography established by Lewis Hine and others in the early part of the twentieth century. The connection between photographic documentary and collective action was a well-established line of response, available as long as the photog
raper did not include the signs of other genres such as the focus on dramatic events of ordinary photojournalism or the obvious manipulation of art photography. Many other photos also met this standard, however, while the "Migrant Mother" quickly achieved critical acclaim as a model of documentary photography, becoming the preeminent photo among the hundreds of thousands of images being produced by RA/FSA photographers and used to pro-

nounce New Deal policies. Roy Stryker, the head of the RA/FSA photography section, dubbed Lange's photo the symbol for the whole project: "She has all the suffering of mankind in her but all of the perseverance too. A restraint and a strange courage. You can see anything you want to in her. She is immortal." According to a manager at the Library of Congress, where the image remains one of the most requested items in the photography collection, "It's the most striking image we have; it hits the heart... an American icon.

Taken within the context of the Great Depression, it is not difficult to see how the photograph captures simultaneously a sense of individual worth and class victimage. The close portraiture creates a moment of personal anxiety as this specific woman, without name, silently harbors her fears for her children while the dirty, ragged clothes and bleak setting signify the hard work and limited prospects of the laboring classes. The disposition of her body — and above all, the involuntary gesture of her right arm reaching up to touch her chin — communicates related tensions. We see both physical strength and palpable worry: a hand capable of productive labor and an absent-minded motion that implies the futility of any action in such impoverished circumstances. The remainder of the composition communicates both a reflexive defensiveness, as the bodies of the two standing children are turned inward and away from the photographer (as if from an impending blow), and a sense of inescapable vulnerability, for her body and head are tilted slightly forward to allow each of the three children the comfort they need; her shirt is unbuttoned, and the sleeping baby is in a partially exposed position.

These features of the photograph are cues for emotional responses that the composition manages with great economy. At its most obvious, "Migrant Mother" communicates the pervasive and paralyzing fear that was widely acknowledged to be a defining characteristic of the depression and experienced by many Americans irrespective of income. Thus, the photograph embodies a limit condition for democracy identified by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his first inaugural address: "[T]he only thing we have to fear is fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror." Roosevelt could not embody that emotion without bringing the country down with him, but perhaps this correspondence accounts in part for each being the most memorable text and image from the era. The shift from his oratory to her visual image has other consequences as well. Embodiment provides a dual function emotionally: it both represents and localizes feelings that can literally know no bounds. By depicting what was known to be a generalized anxiety within the specific form of a woman's body, that emotion is both made real and constrained by conventional attributions of gender.

Of course, the "Migrant Mother" is also overwhelmingly a photograph
about class, and one that evokes not just sympathy but compassion, an impulse to help that crosses social boundaries. The powerful depiction of class difference becomes most obvious when the photograph is contrasted with other visual images that dotted the symbolic environment at the time, such as the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) ad campaign. One especially prominent billboard in the NAM campaign featured the image of a middle-class family—including a smiling mom, self-assured dad, and rosy-cheeked cherubs in their Sunday-best clothing—out for a leisurely drive in the family car. The visual image is framed between two captions announcing “World’s Highest Standard of Living” and “There’s No Way Like the American Way” (fig. 2). NAM was not known for enthusiastic support of the New Deal, and it is clear that visual images figured prominently in the competition for public opinion. The more memorable images would have to be more than straightforward depictions of one condition or another, however, and more than just idealized or realistic.

Class difference is a touchy subject in American political culture, and its presence is often carefully veiled. In “Migrant Mother” class is framed and subordinated in its allusion to religious imagery and its articulation of gender and family relations. The religious allusion may seem obvious, for the photograph follows the template of the Madonna and Child that has been reproduced thousands of times in Western painting, Roman Catholic artifacts for both church and home, and folk art. The primary relationship within the composition is between the mother and the serene baby lying beside her exposed breast, while the other children double as the cherubs or other heavenly figures that typically surround the Madonna. The center-margin relationship establishes the mother as the featured symbol in the composition, while the surrounding figures fill out its theme. Their poses, with eyes averted, give the scene its deep Christian pathos. Their dirty clothes are evocative of the stable in Bethlehem, while their averted eyes make it clear that all is not right in this scene. Instead of heavenly majesty, the transcription from sacred to secular art features vulnerability.

Rather than merely another instance of reproduction, it is more accurate to see the Lange image as a transitional moment in public art. The “Migrant Mother” provides two parallel transcriptions of the Madonna and Child: the image moves from painting to photography, and the Mother of Christ becomes an anonymous woman of the working class. These shifts demonstrate how iconic appeal can be carried over from religious art to increasingly secular, bourgeois representation, and from fine arts institutions to public media. Indeed, there is another, intermediate predecessor that, as far as we know, has not been noted before: William Adolphe Bouguereau’s painting, Charity (1865, fig. 3). The painting recasts the portrait of the Madonna and Child as a poor woman with a baby and two other ragged children, her face
to an organized collective response (a response such as Roosevelt had called for to combat the terror "which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance"). Ironically, the "Migrant Mother" creates the greatest sense of deprivation in respect to one thing that the woman had: a husband who could provide for her. Yet by becoming the definitive representation of the Great Depression, the era is defined visually as Roosevelt proclaimed: a psychological condition and a failure of state action rather than a "failure of substance.

One measure of the shift of responsibility from individual to collective action is that the woman's husband is rarely if ever identified, and he remains a cipher throughout later narratives about the photograph and the woman and children in the frame. This marginal identity is marked in a poem dedicated to the photograph: "During bitter years, when fear and anger broke / Men without work or property to shadows." The shadow father continues the biblical allegory as well: just as Joseph is not the real father in the Christ myth, so the migrant mother's husband is displaced by the higher power of the public (and its agency of the state). And like Joseph, he is kept offstage, mentioned only to fulfill the same role of providing social legitimacy for the woman and her children. By keeping the literal father offstage, actual economic relations are also subordinated to a dispensation of grace from a higher source of power that either has or acquires transcendent status. And just as identification with the religious icon makes the viewer an agent for continuing God's work in the world, so does the secular icon make the public response of the viewer an impetus to state action.

By representing a common fear that transcends class and gender and by defining the viewer as one who can marsh all collective resources to combat fear localized by class, gender, and family relations, "Migrant Mother" allows one to acknowledge paralyzing fear at the same time that it activates an impulse to do something about it. This formal design reveals an implicit movement from the aestheticization of poverty to a rhetorical engagement with the audience, from a compelling portrait to compelling action by the audience on behalf of the subject depicted. For those who initially encountered this photograph in the 1930s, the "Migrant Mother" captured a profound, generalized sense of vulnerability while simultaneously providing a localized means for breaking its spell. With the passage of time and for subsequent generations, the relationship between vulnerability and the need to act has been reversed somewhat, providing a localized sense of fear (by situating the subject of the photograph within a specific time, place, and class), and a generalized sense of action (by casting the viewing public, in whatever incarnation it might appear, in the position of acting on behalf of those in such circumstances). In short, the photograph compresses into a single
implicit promise it offers about the political function of photojournalism, the icon seems to have become a template for images of want. In the 1970s, the image was appropriated by a Black Panther artist who rendered the photograph as a drawing that racialized the mother and her children, making them African American. The drawing emphasized race, an issue typically repressed in U.S. collective memory of the Great Depression, but the caption drew attention to the relationship between race and economic oppression, a problem that remained for African Americans after the initial successes of the civil rights movement began to fade into the background: “Poverty is a crime and our people are the victims.” The drawing thus conjured the structure of feeling that underscored the original photograph’s characterization of unwarranted victimhood, albeit with regard to a different audience. This variation on the image extends across a range of ethnic groups and topics, as is evident from a Google search for “Migrant Mother.” The search turns up not only the original photo but also images of poor women with children who are struggling with poverty, addiction, and forced migration. The mothers range from Hispanic to Asian, sometimes their children are nursing (on the left breast, as the child in the iconic photo had done earlier) and sometimes they are just being held (as in the icon). The template also may be at work in a Time cover that places a woman carrying her child at the front of a migration of civilians during the war in Kosovo. The relationship between an icon and a stock image may be hard to pin down, but as the captioning suggests, the lineage is there. It also may be reinforced by the circulation of a lesser known image taken during the same year (1936) of a nursing mother looking upward anxiously amidst a crowd in Estremadura, Spain. The single image of the iconic photograph both draws on older visual patterns and produces a logic of substitution and reinforcement, yet without losing its charismatic power.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s the photograph was featured once again in a way that underscored its ideological significance, this time as a point of articulation between American liberal democracy and late capitalism. In 1978 the unnamed women in the photograph was identified in an Associated Press (AP) story published initially in the Los Angeles Times and then syndicated across the nation. She was Florence Thompson, a “75 year old Modesto woman.” The story, entitled “Can’t Get a Penny: Famed Photo’s Subject Feels She’s Exploited,” featured the original photograph, the cover of Roy Stryker’s edited volume In This Proud Land: America 1935–1943, and a picture of the now aging Thompson sitting in her trailer home adorned in glasses and what appears to be a polyester leisure suit. The story is not subtle in its contrast between the unnamed woman in the photograph and Thompson herself. The woman in the photograph is contemplative, apparently concerned
about her children and family. Thompson is bitter, angry, alienated not so much by her past as a migrant worker but by the commodification of her image that completely divorced the woman in the photograph from the living Thompson. As she states in the story: “I didn’t get anything out of it. I wish she hadn’t taken my picture... She didn’t ask my name. She said she wouldn’t sell the pictures. She said she’d send me a copy. She never did.” Admitting some pride in being the subject of a famous photograph, she concluded, “But what good is it doing me?”

Here, of course, we see what happens when the living, named subject of the photograph speaks back in a way that undermines the structure of feeling that the photograph has conventionally evoked. In the original photograph the viewer is invited to identify with and act upon the victim image and despair of an anonymous migrant mother as a duty of family and community. Had Florence Thompson later expressed gratitude or marveled at how far the country had progressed or even hoped aloud that no one should have to go through such want and worry again, her voice would have echoed the photograph’s alignment of generalized sympathy and state action to alleviate the symptoms rather than the causes of inequity. When she speaks back and demands compensation, the aura of the original—or at least the presumed authenticity of the original structure of feeling—is destroyed, and underneath is revealed a harsh (and corrupting) world of exploited labor and commercial exploitation. The expectation created by the iconic image is that one should feel concern and commitment, a willingness to help those worthy of public support; instead, the AP article portrays greed and ingratitude.

This article is particularly troubling because it cuts in two directions. On the one hand, it questions the motives of Lange and those who subsequently have profited financially and otherwise from the photograph. On the other hand, it indicts Thompson, also characterized in the article as a “full-blooded Cherokee Indian,” who fails to understand her place in “America’s” collective memory, and who is made to appear willing to trade it all in for a few pieces of silver. In either case, the self-interested pursuit of gain at others’ expense contradicts the iconic bonding of individual need and collective action within an ethos of democratic community. If this exposure were to stick to the photograph it would make it difficult to preserve the significance of the image in U.S. public culture. The closing line of the article is pithily ironic in this regard. Contrary to Thompson’s effort to exercise her property right to stop publication of the photo, “lawyers advised her it was not possible.” It is not so much a question of what is possible, however, but rather of what is appropriate. Once framed by the iconic image of the “Migrant Mother,” Florence Thompson’s liberalism is unseemly.

The story, however, does not end here. Five years later Thompson, now a victim of cancer, suffered a stroke that rendered her speechless. Once again the “Migrant Mother” appeared. This time, however, Thompson could not say the wrong thing, and she returned to her original subject position as a voiceless victim of a “paralyzing fear” with which all could identify. Her grown children, now voiced, explained that their mother lived on Social Security and that she had no medical insurance; she was a victim of circumstances. They thus pleaded for funds to help cover her medical costs. Over a period of several weeks she received $30,000 in contributions. Florence Thompson died shortly thereafter, but not before experiencing the impact of her own disembodied iconicity on U.S. public culture.

The story continues to circulate but not as the full story. It has been neatly edited to feature only the shift from poverty then to prosperity now, a change illustrated by a picture of mom with her three daughters from the photo, who now are beaming, healthy adults (fig. 4). Florence and her family came
through the Depression and worked their way into the middle class,” we are told. What more does one need to know? Dad is still absent—not in the picture, and never mentioned—and perhaps that erasure schools the viewer not to ask too many questions. Yet despite the journey to Happyville, the second photo still contains a haunting echo of the original. Thompson does not look happy. Indeed, she looks beaten, with downcast eyes and a sagging body that is tilting sideways as if she might fall. More telling, her hands again speak volumes. The right hand is, after all those years, still touching her cheek in a gesture of self-consciousness or anxiety. The left hand, which in the original had been removed in the darkroom, is now holding on to her daughter’s arm as if for emotional support. Whereas her daughters look directly at the viewer with snapshot smiles, Thompson still is being offered for view. She remains passive, dependent on others for help, intimately tied to her family but an object rather than agent of public opinion. The narrative explains away this possible dissonance by saying that she felt more at home in the trailer than in the suburban tract house her children had provided her. Still a migrant, Thompson remains trapped in her past, unable to participate fully in the new culture of consumption. Her daughters have no such handicaps, however, and in any case the contradiction between individual self-assertion and collective identity has been artfully erased. Although Thompson and each of her three daughters in the picture now are named, she can never achieve full individuality, while their individual lives stand as narrative fulfillment of and substitute for the political program that undergirded their lives and came to be symbolized by her image.

The photo’s circulation as an icon also generates additional uses. As with any icon, it has been altered for comic effect, although less so than some. Frankly, there is little to exploit in that regard, and perhaps it is significant that the most widely available instant-treat gender ironically. Some might conclude that use of the photograph in the 1996 Clinton campaign film “A Place Called America” was close to parody. The film’s organizational scheme is that of paging through a family photo album. The “Migrant Mother” appears and goes quickly by, as if one is looking at a shot of distant relatives or another family from the neighborhood. Too strong a connection would have made little sense during the roaring 1990s, but the almost subliminal presence at once situated the Clinton presidency within the tradition (and accomplishments) of the New Deal, while it constituted a visual (and perhaps only a visual) commitment to the continuation of the Democratic party’s program of social welfare. It is worth noting also that the image appeared amidst shots of military action. What otherwise would be an incongruous association provides a leveling of the hierarchy of national service. If anti-poverty programs are as important as the army, then perhaps there was less reason to fault Clinton for his lack of a military record.

And the beat goes on. For a particularly weird example of how the icon of poverty can be used to promote prosperity, we note the January 1997 advertisement for an Arts and Entertainment Network show, “California and the Dream Seekers.” As a blonde woman drives a 1950s red convertible down Rodeo Drive, we see amidst the palm trees three sepia-tinged photos: one of a few guys using old movie cameras, one of a gold prospector and his mule, and the “Migrant Mother.” Perhaps she is just there to provide gender balance, but the brush with irony seems not to have bothered the ad writers. The accompanying text claims that “here [in California] they could escape their past and invent a new life,” and apparently we are to assume that the migrant mother made it, just as did the goldiggers before her, as did the early Hollywood cinema, which now provides the overwhelming validation of the story being told. It’s a good thing to chase dreams, at least if you do so in California. (This use of the photograph reminds us of the remark that the film Gandhi was a hit in Hollywood because its subject embodied their deepest commitments: he was thin and tan.) Marked by sepia tones as events thoroughly interned in the past—there are apparently no starving pea pickers today—the good life now is the individual pursuit of happiness, a life lived without collective obligations toward others.

Despite these examples of how the iconic image can be simultaneously relied on and diminished in use, the “Migrant Mother” still can be used for powerful statements on behalf of democracy’s promise of social and economic justice. The January 3, 2005, cover of the Nation is a case in point (fig. 5). The feature story is titled “Down and Out in Discount America.” The mother’s dress has been colorized blue and the woman is wearing a Wal-Mart jacket to which a nametag has been added. The designer’s description of his work reveals a clear sense of political artistry:

I think the inspiration is obvious: Wal-Mart is, in many ways, just a new Dustbowl for the workers in it, as it inspires a steady downward spiral of both shoppers and workers. Socially regressive institutions and circumstances still abound; it’s just that this one has better parking.

Using the well-known Depression-era symbol of people (and women especially) going as far down as they can go seemed like an [sic] simple way to say that. Putting her in a Wal-Mart jacket shows the reason why it’s happening.

And everyone who sees it gets it right away.
they work with and reinforce the defining features of the composition. The image provides a powerful pattern of definition that then can be transposed to other times, social locales, and issues. It articulates a familiar yet complex structure of representation, emotional response, and collective action. It provides a stock resource for both advocacy on behalf of the dispossessed and affirmation of the society capable of meeting those needs. Thus, it outlines a set of conventions for public appeal that can in turn go through successive transpositions, yet it does so without cost to the aura of the original.

The icon’s power comes no more from its plasticity than it does from having a fixed meaning. Instead, the iconic photograph outlines a set of civic relationships in respect to fundamental tensions within liberal-democratic society. This is a society that has to honor both the common good and the individual pursuit of happiness, both the public representation of social reality and the mystification of economic relationships, both sacred images of the common people and a process of commodification. The “Migrant Mother” is only our first and perhaps least complicated example, but identifying the photograph’s several transcriptions and its range of appropriations already begins to trace the borders of the genre. That outline becomes clearer when we turn to the next image in our visual archive of collective memory.

“Times Square Kiss”

Alfred Eisenstaedt’s “Times Square Kiss” (fig. 6) would appear to tell a different story from that of the “Migrant Mother,” and so it does in part. Eisenstaedt, often dubbed the “father of photojournalism,” had been one of the original four photographers hired by Life magazine at its inception in 1936. In August 1945 he was on assignment for Life in Manhattan, and when the victory over Japan was finally announced on August 14th, Eisenstaedt took to the streets to record the festivities later described in an article dubbed “Victory Celebrations”:

It was as if joy had been rationed and saved up for the three years, eight months and seven days since Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941. The tensions of war exploded into an orgy of frenzy and fun. Clock-around celebrations in the cities went on to a cacophony of church chimes, air-raid sirens, honking horns, blaring bands, singing, shrieking and shouting. Telephone books were torn into confetti and streets were strewn with tons of paper. Servicemen kissed and were kissed, ripped shreds from their uniforms and gave them out as souvenirs. For the most part it was all good natured letting off steam. But in San Francisco, teeming with sailors on shore leave, the steam exploded. Store windows on Market


The “Migrant Mother” is a single, vivid image, and also a complex representation that draws together the reformist tradition of documentary photography, the pictorial conventions of religious iconography, and the interpellation of the public audience in the place of an absent father. Subsequent appropriations reflect varied structural and strategic interests, while