



INTRODUCTION

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE HISTORY OF VISUAL CULTURE

In a wonderful story from the oral culture of the radio call-in show, a pious listener objected to the use of cosmetics on the basis of scriptural authority. When the listener was asked to cite the biblical passage that supported her view, she referred to the story of Jezebel. “Could you point out where in the text it talks about makeup?” the radio host asked. “Well, it isn’t actually in the text, but the illustration on page 89 . . .”¹ People of all kinds take illustrations seriously because an illustration, as the word itself suggests, is supposed to illuminate the proper meaning of the accompanying text. In this instance, however, the illustration supplanted the text by providing a meaning the viewer felt ought to be found there.

Popular images of Jesus offer familiar instances of a comparable evocation of meaning where textual sources provide none. Warner Sallman’s *Head of Christ* (fig. 1) and the countless variations of the *Sacred Heart of Jesus* (fig. 2) portray a Savior whose appearance, though it is never described in the New Testament, is instantly recognized. These images and many like them have served as powerful symbols in American Protestant and Catholic piety because believers have learned from childhood to regard them as illustrations, as untrammelled visualizations of what they profess. Understanding why this is so and how it occurs requires that we see popular religious imagery as part of a visual piety, by which I mean the visual formation and practice of religious belief. In so doing we must attend not only to those religions that actively employ imagery, but also to the largely unwritten cultural history and aesthetics of popular reli-

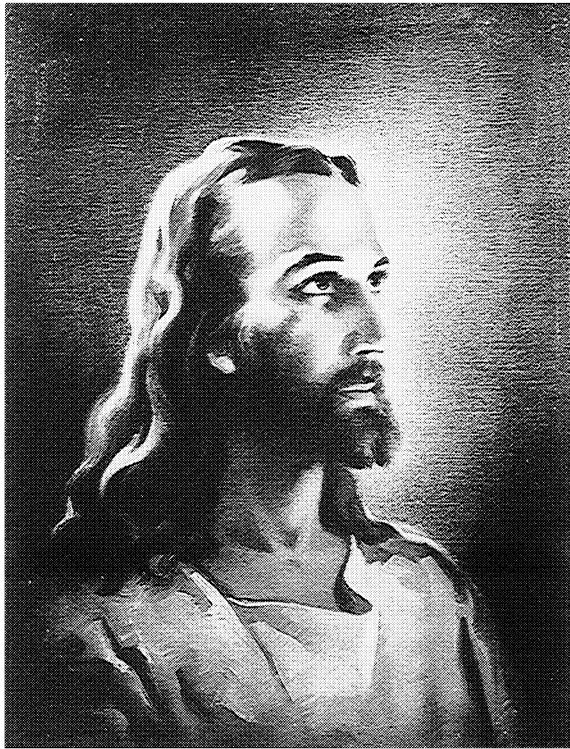


FIGURE 1. Warner Sallman, *Head of Christ*, 1940, oil on canvas, 28 1/4 × 22 1/8 inches. Courtesy of Jessie C. Wilson Galleries, Anderson University.

gious art. Only then can we begin to understand how images articulate the social structures of a believer's world. Accordingly, this study investigates the role of mass-produced religious images in the social construction of reality by those who exchange and display them.

MATERIAL THINGS AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

The golden thread of this study is visual piety. Conventional wisdom takes one of two polarized views regarding the relation of art and religion: either art is the handmaiden of religion, or else the artist is an autonomous agent working out of his or her own inspiration, which may or may not parallel the specific concerns of religion. But surely the relationship is much more complex than this simplistic opposition suggests. Visual piety offers a different way of thinking about art and religion. As the set of practices, attitudes, and ideas invested in images that structure

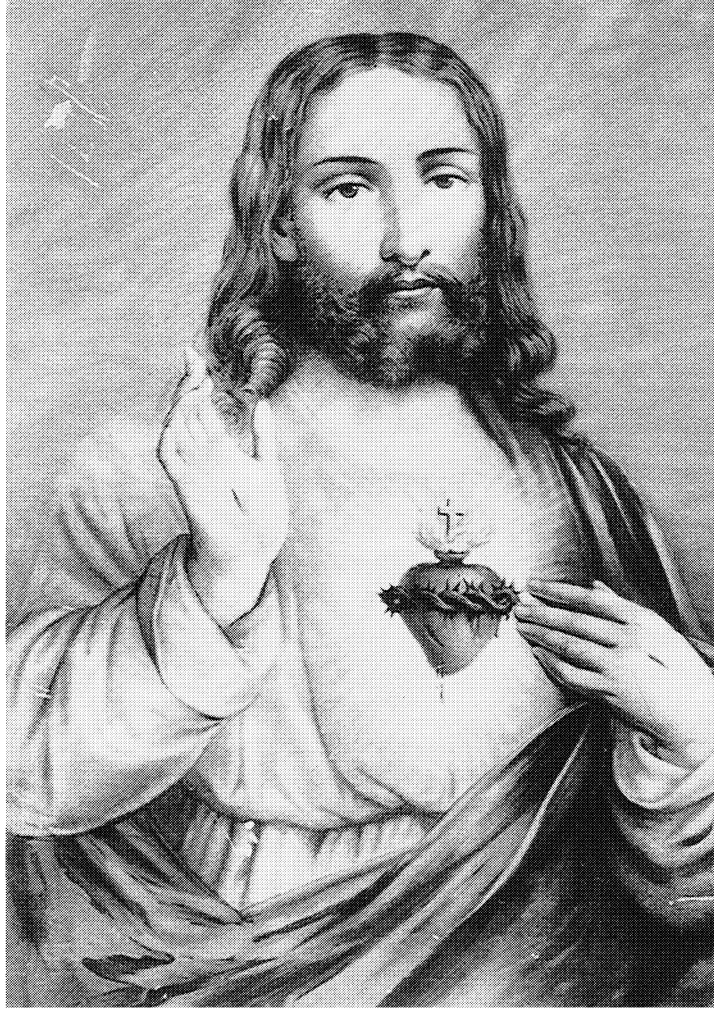


FIGURE 2. *The Sacred Heart of Jesus*, decal on pressboard, 15 3/4 × 11 1/2 inches. Photo by author.

the experience of the sacred, visual piety cancels the dualistic separation of mind and matter, thought and behavior, that plagues a great deal of work on art and religion. In a recent and instructive study, Colleen McDannell has rightly stressed the need for overcoming such dualisms.² I will argue that the act of looking itself contributes to religious formation and, indeed, constitutes a powerful practice of belief. This is apparent in many of the letters I received a few years ago in response to an ad placed in devotional magazines. I asked readers to indicate what they

thought about the work of Warner Sallman, in particular his *Head of Christ*. The resulting 531 letters provide much of the data for the analyses that make up this book.³ Scores of letters offer direct evidence of what I call visual piety. For instance, one woman wrote that “by beholding [pictures of Jesus] we become changed and only in heaven will we know the extent of the heart’s influences for good by the inspired pictures of Mr. Sallman” (463). Another woman sounded a common note when she wrote that Sallman’s image “has offered me a comfort through just looking at it” (412). And one respondent from Kentucky reported that as a child she regarded Sallman’s *Head of Christ* as “Christ, like with the KING JAMES version of the bible—that was the bible! God’s words, no other book was true, same with this image of Christ, when we saw it, it was Christ” (531).

From the Catholic mystic who sees the Virgin or receives the wounds of Christ in the same manner that she has seen them in devotional images, to the Sunday school student who is drilled with charts and visual diagrams in order to memorize the catechism, we see that there is no single visual piety, but many.⁴ I want to draw attention to the plurality of visual practices, which are distinguished one from the other by the history of theology, cultural politics, and ritual uses of the image, all of which are in turn keyed to the image’s style and iconography and the historical circumstances of its production and reception. My approach to visual piety is historical in that I understand religious images as cultural products. Rather than restrict imagery to the rarefied state of aesthetic contemplation or submit it to theological critique or application, this study seeks to examine imagery in terms of the social worlds of those who make, merchandise, purchase, and use it.

Looking at images, giving and receiving them, conducting prayer and Bible study before them, displaying them in the home, handing them on to the next generation—these are some of the iconic practices of belief, acts of visual piety, that I will study. The concept of practice, as defined by social analysts from Karl Marx to present-day writers such as Pierre Bourdieu and Catherine Bell, is helpful here because it stresses that thinking, wanting, deciding, speaking, and looking, as well as ritual performance and gift-giving, are all part of the concrete world-making activities that constitute social behavior.⁵ These are not mindless actions but embodied forms of cognition and collective memory that reside in the concrete conditions of social life. Notably, latter-day ethnography, history, and social analysis all refuse to subordinate the study of practice to such abstract discourses in the production of meaning as theology or

philosophy. As a result, the religious practices that constitute visual piety are able to receive the scholarly attention that theology, religious philosophy, and ecclesiastical pronouncements have monopolized heretofore. All devotional practices—whether the high ritual of Holy Communion or the display of devotional images in one's bedroom—are forms of collective memory that offer the scholar primary documents of the construction and transmission of everyday life, which is arguably for most people, most of the time, where character is formed and social allegiances are negotiated. Moreover, everyday life involves the daily practice of absorbing, testing, debating, and ratifying the vast and always-changing corpus of *doxa*—the opinions, assumptions, and inclinations that form much of what Pierre Bourdieu calls the *habitus*, the “system of dispositions” that comprises the symbolic universe in which we live.⁶ But more about this shortly.

Basic to the study of religious visual practice are the world and self that visual piety helps to articulate. The work of several social thinkers has been especially instructive for me in this regard. In a fascinating essay that summarizes much of his fruitful inquiry into the important role material things play in the formation and maintenance of selfhood in modern life, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has argued that “the self is a fragile construction of the mind” that is constantly assailed by “psychic entropy.”⁷ Rather than being an inherently stable entity, that is, human consciousness is characterized by a tendency to fade into unfocused, chaotic activity; this process, however, is in turn powerfully countered by our dependence on things. According to Csikszentmihalyi, artifacts invest the human self with a degree of objectivity in three ways: by displaying power and social status; by securing the continuity of the self over time in terms of focal points in the present, traces of the past, and indications of future expectations; and by providing material evidence of our position in the web of social relations.⁸ In each case material things assert our identities and maintain them in the face of an ever-present flux of sensation and mental activity.

Csikszentmihalyi's analysis is extremely helpful for understanding the importance of prosaic objects and commodities in everyday life. Decorating the home with background and mood imagery, for example, should be seen—among other things—as a vital component of mental health because it offers a “sensory template” for the self, a calming matrix that regulates the mind's activity by imposing a certain consistency or redundancy. The result is a secure sense of continuity, a baseline against which to measure all other activity—an outcome that certainly

conforms to the American experience of the home.⁹ To this psychological insight historians can bring their research in such social continua as private and public domains, informal and formal behavior, and the sacred and profane in order to historicize the social construction of reality.

In this book I will seek to measure in any number of ways the social and historical world-making that is so deeply invested in the visual culture of religion. Investigation of the human self must be integrated with study of the world in which any self necessarily exists. Indeed, the two, world and self, bear a dialectical relation such that neither is conceivable without the other. To Csikszentmihalyi's continuum of radical aloneness/complete entropy, therefore, we must add another axis ranging from self-determination to institutional determination of the self. My sense of reality, the world in which I live, is a social construction rather than an idiosyncratic, solipsistic invention or a purely objective state of affairs impinging on my consciousness. As sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann put it in their classic treatise, *The Social Construction of Reality*, "The statement that man produces himself in no way implies some sort of Promethean vision of the solitary individual. Man's self-production is always, and of necessity, a social enterprise."¹⁰

Berger and Luckmann argued that worlds are the product of a three-fold process—externalization, objectivation, internalization—that engages self and world in a dialectical tension. Humans work, represent, and interpret, that is, they expend their efforts in labor; encode and invest these efforts in certain products, and then regard or use these products as objective entities possessing personal value. A world is a relentless circulation of values, an unceasing exchange of labor for goods and goods for meaning. Each act is converted into the next, each presupposes the other. None of these moments is the absolute origin of reality, and none amounts to an ultimate aim, for every meaning that we derive from a product is reinvested in the unending quest for more or different meaning. The world is an ongoing production, Berger and Luckmann stress, and "the relationship between the individual and the objective social world is like an ongoing balancing act."¹¹

Everyday experience follows the templates of "recipe knowledge," what Berger and Luckmann consider the "rules of conduct" in ordinary life, a "body of generally valid truths about reality." This knowledge matches what one expects to find with what the social world presents to us in its objective structures. That is, it "'programs' the channels in which externalization produces an objective world" and finds the objective world that is acceptable for the return moment of internalizing

what is “out there.” For Berger and Luckmann this representation and legitimation of the reality of everyday life is conducted principally by means of language.¹² The burden of the present book, however, is to show that the process of social construction is profoundly dependent on images as well—in this case, popular religious images.

Although *The Social Construction of Reality*, published in 1966, is now somewhat dated, more recent studies of culture have built on it by developing the dialectical activity of social construction and applying it to studies of consumption in industrial society or to anthropological fieldwork in nonindustrial cultures. I will cite the work of two scholars who study how nondiscursive practices inform the construction of social worlds. In his very useful elaboration of cultural theory in the study of consumption and commodities, Grant McCracken regards culture as a creative, dialectical force that structures the world of consumers. For him, culture is a “lens” through which phenomena are seen as well as a “blueprint” that “determines the co-ordinates of social action and productive activity, specifying the behaviors and objects that issue from both.” Culture, he contends, “constitutes the world by supplying it with meaning.”¹³ It does so by engaging both the medium in which it is experienced and the paradigm against which it is measured and imagined. McCracken’s work focuses on the vital role that material goods play in this process of meaning-making.

Like McCracken, Pierre Bourdieu does not limit himself to language but examines artistic taste and appreciation, the household, and mythology in order to understand the formation of the habitus.¹⁴ Defined as “an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted,” the habitus is both the collection of schemes informing practice and the generative source of new or modified practices.¹⁵ According to Bourdieu—who argues that human practice, though it exhibits a collective structure, is not rigidly predetermined—the habitus is a “system of lasting, transposable dispositions” that integrates historical experience into a body of schemes that can be transferred analogously to new situations in order to solve new problems. As such, the habitus is “the strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations.”¹⁶ The habitus, we may say, contributes fundamentally to the construction of the world that one takes for granted because it provides the range of conscious and unconscious codes, protocols, principles, and presuppositions that are enacted in the world’s characteristic practices. This materialist version of Immanuel Kant’s a priori categories of understanding

demands the historical contingency and social construction of memory, and conceives of this in dialectical acrobatics akin to those of Berger and Luckmann: “The mental structures which construct the world of objects,” Bourdieu writes, “are constructed in the practice of a world of objects constructed according to the same structures.”¹⁷ Put more simply, Bourdieu regards the habitus as “history turned into nature.”¹⁸ In spite of Bourdieu’s Byzantine explication, the concept of habitus is useful for understanding the dynamics of the social construction of reality. One of the principal aims of this study is to show how the process of naturalization occurs in the practices of visual piety.

The importance of material culture—including images—in the study of religion has been urged in several recent studies.¹⁹ I will proceed along similar lines by focusing on images as a unique category of material object, a category characterized by the special ability to mediate imaginary, linguistic, intellectual, and material domains. I will argue in a number of contexts that this ability gives the image particular power in the dialectical movement from externalization to objectivation to internalization. Proponents of religious imagery have not failed to underscore the unique capacity of images to make real what they depict. One Christian pedagogue, Frederica Beard, writing in 1920, praised the use of pictures in religious education because “a picture is the mean between the thing and the word.”²⁰ Beard felt that objects draw attention to themselves in the context of classroom teaching and that words are often too abstract to gain the student’s attention, whereas stereoscopic images of biblical landscapes and subjects, she maintained, bring their distant subjects near.²¹ Images, according to Beard, mediate distance in time and space and avoid the extremes of abstraction and distraction to rivet the student’s attention to the task at hand, namely, spiritual formation. The use of photographs, prints, and mass-reproduced paintings in religious education and devotion has been very important to Christians ever since the nineteenth century because these images allow a subtle transition from artifact to world.²² As Beard put it, “The imagination will very easily overleap the intervening time as we stand upon [the stereographic reproduction of] the site of the temple enclosure and look off to the Mount of Olives, to the modern Garden of Gethsemane.” Beard reproduced modern images to make her point. A photograph of Mt. Gerizim, the Samaritan place of worship referred to by Jesus in John 4:21, for example, offered students an immediate glimpse of “the rock on which Abraham looked and David stood and before which Solomon knelt.”²³

What the child leaps into with such imagery, of course, is not ancient

Palestine, but the early-twentieth-century American Christian idea of the "Holy Land."²⁴ What the image depicts and what the devout viewer thinks it means merge seamlessly into a compelling presence. Among the most insightful writers on this subtle process is Roland Barthes, who described the power of the photographic image as its apparent ability to root a cultural message in the "natural" world. Barthes, however, limited this power of naturalization to photography. Speaking of the photograph as an analog of the world, as "an emanation of *past reality*," he differentiated the artifice of the painted image from the power of the photographic image, which possesses its referent within itself.²⁵ I propose, though, that we may recognize this power of naturalization in *any image* whose reception involves the magical sense of making the absent present.²⁶ In fact, there is ample historical research to show that prints, paintings, drawings, and even accidental patterns can render for viewers the ontological presence of someone or something.²⁷ Therefore, virtually all visual artifacts can do what Barthes wrote of photography: present as a "certificate of presence" the evidence that "the past is as certain as the present."²⁸ Images accomplish this by means of a visual rhetoric in which, as Barthes shows, images and language, rather than being discrete orders of representation, are intricately interwoven.²⁹ Thus, although language is a symbolic form that we all share, it should not be understood as an isolated or autonomous operator in the construction of reality. Language and vision, word and image, text and picture are in fact deeply enmeshed and collaborate powerfully in assembling our sense of the real.

A world is a social and a historical construction of things and other beings bearing a certain order with pretenses to objectivity and universality. Images, songs, and objects evoke the worlds that make them and seductively suggest to those whose world they share a totality and uniformity that is as reassuring as it is tendentious. In fact, a world is an unstable edifice that generations constantly labor to build, raze, rebuild, and redesign. To use a literary metaphor, a world is a story that is told and retold in order to fortify its spell of enchantment. And there is never just one story, never just one world. Worlds collide with one another as well as contain within themselves the contradictions and disjunctures that must be mediated or concealed for the sake of a world's endurance.³⁰ Material culture, such as imagery, tends to appear at these sites of disjuncture and contradiction: popular images often serve to mend them or conceal them, while avant-garde images tend to foment the rupture of such sites. The cultural work that popular images per-

form is often a mediating one, serving to bolster one world against another, to police the boundaries of the familiar, or to suture the gaps that appear as the fabric of a world wears thin. Popular images are often quotidian, tirelessly repeating what we have always known, as if the ritual act of repetition might transfigure a belief into a condition of nature. Scholars such as Csikszentmihalyi, McCracken, Bourdieu, and Berger are apt to point out that a culture is something that needs constantly to be cultivated lest it cease to offer its tenants the produce of a nurturing world. As Berger grimly put it, "Every human society is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death."³¹ Or, in somewhat less eloquent terms: "The symbolic universe shelters the individual from ultimate terror by bestowing ultimate legitimation upon the protective structures of the institutional order."³² In other words, the schemes of social order to which humans commit themselves offer in return a less chaotic universe. As we shall see, keeping chaos and the wasteland at bay is very much what devotional images are about in modern American religious culture.

The concept of the world and its social construction is difficult to define with precision for the historian's use and requires a degree of caution. One important study of the phenomenology of everyday reality defined the "life-world" as "that province of reality which the wide-awake and normal adult simply takes for granted in the attitude of common sense."³³ But what concerns me (and most historians by trade) is what separates one group's province from another's over time. Although we are all fond of assuming that our sense of reality is universal, in fact each of us defines and evaluates the worlds in which we live quite differently according to our age, gender, race, education, religion, class, economic status, and cultural tradition. Yet human reality is not carved up into fundamentally discrete worlds: the human situation is much messier than that. With the exception of a few highly charged frontiers, the boundaries of a world are usually not clear, but trail off into unconsciousness, ambivalence, and the indeterminate zones of overlapping worlds. Worlds are continually shaped by changes in such social and economic conditions as employment, residence, professional associations, marriage, and social status. In addition, a variety of geographical locales not only blur distinctions but also supply rich resources for both the contents and structures of a shared sense of modern life. Shopping malls, flea markets, fairs, public schools, amusement parks, and most sites of recreation and sport are places where distinctions in social status, gender, and race can be ambiguous and subject to rather sharp re-

definition. Scholars, in short, must approach a world as something indefinite and elastic, impure and inconsistent.³⁴

A final word on the social construction of reality is called for. I do not imagine that a world is the product of a leisurely weekend's occupation. A world is not a lifestyle, not a cheap suit—or even an expensive one—that one dons at will. It may be that some critics of constructivism take too seriously twentieth-century advertising's promotion of the illusion that the self can redefine itself in some fundamental way simply by acquiring certain goods. In any event, a world is far too complex and vast for any single person to fabricate. By the same token, I do not mean by the social construction of reality that worlds are pure fictions in the sense that they have no relationship to anything outside of themselves. Just as no piece of literary fiction may legitimately claim this, neither may any world. A real world is not a fantasy but something that individuals share with one another and with the past. It is the universe of institutions, economic relations, epistemology, laws, and myths of all kinds that constitute the more or less systemic structure of collective life in a certain time and place. No configuration of signs—indeed, nothing in human affairs—strikes me as entirely arbitrary: the sheer momentum of history, self-interest, genetic inheritance, and the force of social institutions guarantees that, though shot through with chance, human experience is anything but pure happenstance. Although a sign may or may not bear an ontological relation to its referent (as a photograph does, whereas a word usually does not), the fact is that all signs are motivated by the history and system of meaning that produce them, that is, by the grammar and tradition of usage. While the social conditions in which we exist did not descend from heaven or emerge out of the earth, they did develop from the past and they do press us into the future. If worlds are invented, therefore, it is a long and collective process of invention and one that is inherently conservative. It is, in other words, one that we are always inclined to rely on, and at the same time to forget.

Yet as inertial, homogenizing, and impersonal as world-making and world-maintaining may be, the fact that worlds are *made* preserves the important possibility of human agency. Although we tend to spend most of our lives doing little more than sustaining the worlds in which we live, we exert considerable control over our lives in the host of choices we make each day; and certainly all of us mitigate and imaginatively transform the oppressive aspects of our worlds by reading fiction and watching films—or by practicing a religion. In seeking to discern the dynamics of world-making in the use of popular religious imagery, therefore, I do

not exclude in principle the possibility of ingenious and novel visions of reality; but this will not be the object of my attention. The histories of science, religion, and art as traditionally written have fixated on these transformative moments and offer them in abundance.³⁵ These histories should not, however, exclude the considerably more mundane but no less significant “making” that will concern us here. This prosaic sense of world-making consists in the transmission of a world from one generation to the next, a tradition or handing down that both *maintains* the world of the elders and *makes* the world of the children. Thus, making and maintaining are either side of a single enterprise.

THE AESTHETICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Two essential features of any world are the ordinary things people do again and again, and the extraordinary things people do in order to assert control over their worlds. On the one hand, worlds exhibit highly predictable patterns of behavior, which their inhabitants rely on without in most cases giving the matter any thought. I have in mind here such apparently incidental things as how we sit at work or at home, how we drive, the small conversations we conduct with others and ourselves, the glances that punctuate our conversations, the arrangement of objects on our desks. Most of the time these things do not command much of our attention, yet we are all well aware of their capacity to signify attitudes and relationships when we turn to decode their meanings in the behavior of others. On the other hand, human beings also do unusual things that contrast markedly with the ordinary but that in fact serve to safeguard the ordinary or to subvert its tedium. Nations conduct wars to preserve their autonomy; communities undergo religious revival in order to renew their beliefs; parents produce children in order to extend their world; and individuals submit to major surgery in the hope of reclaiming a healthy life. Even the extraordinary is ritualized, repeated behavior, but it steps outside the security of the familiar in order to secure the old foundations or to erect a new basis for the everyday world in which people dwell. In these two features, therefore, we confront the everyday and the extraordinary in human life.

What is the everyday, and why should we care to know? An obvious answer is that the everyday is whatever is ordinary, mundane, habitual, common, and generally shared in life; whatever occupies most of our day-to-day lives, from one year to the next. But what power do (or should) bank lobbies, gas stations, birthday parties, ball games, class-

rooms, shopping malls, and Sunday mornings exert on the formation of our identities? We are perhaps inclined to believe that such rare moments as hallowed rites and dramatic events enjoy a disproportionate role in shaping who we are.³⁶ Certainly an important aspect of scholarship in history and religious studies has stressed great figures and revelatory moments as being the most formative. Why, then, should scholars study the history of everyday life? Answers are not hard to find. If, for starters, we are to understand the nature and fate of the individual in light of modern theories of collectivity, social organization, and democratic egalitarianism, the everyday demands our attention. To that must be added the need to understand the uniquely modern experience of the masses and their unprecedented culture of consumption in a global economy that moves events as much as any monarch, reformer, savior, or general ever did. Finally, the everyday compels interest simply because human beings construct their social reality, and they do so to the prosaic rhythms of everyday life as well as in the rarefied events of catastrophes, epiphanies, and revolutions.

As a way of clarifying what is meant by the routines and rituals that each person performs, we may look to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis of the presentation of the self in everyday life. Goffman argued that humans fulfill a variety of roles in their interactions with one another, constructing a self in each performance that is identical with the role. We are each concerned with managing the impressions that we project to others. Role playing occurs in various settings—in the workplace and at home; in leisure, commerce, and romance; on intimate terms no less than in larger, formal, collective circumstances. "The object of a performer," states Goffman, "is to sustain a particular definition of the situation, this representing, as it were, his claim to what reality is."³⁷ Roles, in other words, whether scripted or improvised, are defined by a setting and belong to shared social routines. They structure our interrelations by providing the guidelines of daily interaction. In so doing, roles promote the sense that reality is an objective other and that the self is fully present in the performance.

When an individual plays a part, he (or she) implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he seems to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be.³⁸ Everyday reality unfolds on the stage of interactions where one performs one's self (or oneself) with others; the

self is formed as the impression one's performance offers. Everyday life exhibits coherence, uniformity, and concreteness by virtue of the repeated performances of key roles each day.

Goffman's analysis of interaction rituals suggests that everyday life is essentially temporal in structure. But is there an artifact or a place that we can adduce as an indisputable specimen of the everyday—something as mundane, for example, as a domestic utensil? If so, what happens to the everyday when the utensil is placed on a pedestal in a museum, thus becoming an aesthetic object? Perhaps the everyday consists of an object's instrumental or functional capacity, as opposed to its ability to focus aesthetic contemplation. Yet what could be more everyday than a child's song, whose purpose is inseparable from its mere performance? Rather than the purpose an artifact serves or the formal structure it exhibits, we may wish to consider the effect of the item in order to determine the nature of the everyday. By "effect" I mean to suggest that the everyday is neither a thing nor an objective circumstance but rather a pattern of human consciousness. Furthermore, I do not mean what something makes us think of, feel, or want to do as much as what it makes us *forget*. Forgetting things is very common—forgetting a receipt, where I put the keys, when a book is due, what an acquaintance's name is, and so on. We forget because something else has claimed our attention.

As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton have stressed, human consciousness and its physical environment, such as the household, constitute an economy (their term is "ecology") in which not everything can be the object of attention.³⁹ We must choose or have chosen for us what to pay attention to and what to ignore. Forgetting is therefore as important as remembering in the social economy of everyday life. Memory is a selective device, which suggests that forgetting is not accidental, but deliberate. I do not mean this only in the sense of Freud's psychopathology of everyday life, where forgetting results from the repression of unacceptable instinctual urges. I have more broadly in mind forgetting as the enablement of attention.⁴⁰ Scholars of *Alltagsgeschichte*, the German term for the history of everyday life, have stressed the importance of routine as a structural element in day-to-day life, since "routines function to relieve the individual of constant uncertainty or doubts."⁴¹ This alleviation allows us to focus our attention on certain tasks or subjects in accord with the economy of consciousness. Put another way, we can say that it is necessary to engage in many repetitive tasks and behaviors in order to free up attention for those experiences that are more demanding, absorbing, sensuously rewarding, or critical.

I do not wish to suggest that the everyday is merely a set of routines; I do suggest, though, that it can be isolated for study as an apparatus that spans consciousness and unconsciousness and grants people the opportunity to interact with one another in lives that are more or less effective. The everyday is the domain not only of the unconscious routine repeated mindlessly through the day, but also of the quotidian tasks that the routine enables the person to perform. Thus we engage in small talk with fellow workers while changing a printer cartridge; we stand perfectly still as we listen to an instructor or superior; we drive home through busy traffic while mentally replaying a conversation with an associate. In each case we don't need to attend exclusively to the immediate environment of the conversation, the posture of the body, or the traffic because we have internalized the protocols that govern behavior in such circumstances so that we might pay fuller attention to what consciously interests us.

Excavating the many sediments of everything we forget would unearth an enormous mass of silent, invisible assumptions and codes that allow us to wend our way through a welter of stimuli that, were they allowed to claim our attention, would plunge us into confusion or render impossible whatever task we wished to attend to. This becomes palpably clear whenever we visit another society where our language is useless, traffic and currency are different, customs and laws alien. The world there is quite unfamiliar, we are estranged, everything is new, each taste, smell, and sight is novel. We are helpless and often become anxious in the most harmless situations. Every detail can claim our attention; every sensation, however insignificant, may become an object of our contemplation. The economy of consciousness is spent recklessly as we wander like children in that strange place. Eventually, as we assimilate new patterns of behavior and exercise simple means of communication, the novelty subsides, and we are able to organize our consciousness into gross forms of attention and inattention. As a result, a characteristic structure emerges that provides for more effective interaction with those whose world we now share. The everyday returns to us—as is often evident in the way tourists follow the same pathway to breakfast each morning, eat at the same table, visit the same beach repeatedly.

Novelty, however, is not the negation of the everyday. Indeed, the novel happens every day—in the newspapers and the mass media, in gossip, in chance events that could not have been predicted, in all the avenues that bring the extraordinary into the steady rhythms of the mun-

dane. Likewise, the novel quickly dissipates, rapidly becomes the contents of the commonplace. Nothing is more boring than yesterday's news. The novel and the ordinary are either side of a single coin, the coin of the realm of everyday life. The novel, in short, is whatever the submerged routines of repeated behavior permit us to hold in concentrated view.

Where the everyday is transcended, however, is in any experience that calls into question the conceptual and aesthetic structures of forgetting and remembering, the apparatus of attention itself. With the birth of a new framework, the previous apparatus becomes conventional, even dull. This we find in the avant-garde art form, the religious revelation or mystical illumination, the transformative rite of passage, and the trauma of war, violence, or emotional breakdown. These events sharply distinguish themselves from the everyday. Thus, it is necessary to differentiate the avant-garde from all other aesthetic experience. The effect of art in traditional and popular aesthetic experience is to absorb consciousness by concentrating it in the features of an object without transforming the parameters of perception—without, in other words, changing the way we see. Avant-garde art, in contrast, attempts to transform the conceptual structures and perceptual habits that make an experience appear the way it does. Avant-garde aesthetic experience focuses on the conceptual and emotional structures that define reality and not just on the physical features of a work of art.⁴²

Aesthetic experience in the widest sense is a large category, one that includes the contemplation of progressive art and traditional forms as well as any object or moment in human society or the natural world. Moreover, although aesthetic experience tends to be defined by the absorption of consciousness in the “inherent qualities of the object,” creating what Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow,” it should not be limited to this contemplative gaze.⁴³ Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton have presumptively reserved the term “aesthetic” to designate transformation, which they understand in terms of John Dewey's distinction between perception and mere recognition: just as “an act of perception means that the scheme through which we interpret an object is changed or enlarged,” so, according to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, does the aesthetic experience involve “something more than the projection of meaning from the person to the environment or vice-versa.”⁴⁴ Recognition, in contrast, regards an object as a tag or sign and not in terms of its “inherent qualities.” But we must object to this formulation on two counts. First, aesthetic contemplation need not transform perception but