When NASA astronaut Neil Armstrong left the first human footprints on the surface of the moon on 21 July 1969, live coverage of the historic moment was radiated to a record TV audience of some 600 million people on all continents of the globe. Photographs of Armstrong and fellow astronaut Buzz Aldrin hoisting the Star-Spangled Banner in the lunar sand filled the title pages of newspapers and magazines worldwide and soon became iconic representations of the successful mission of the U.S.-American spacecraft Apollo 11 to take its U.S.-American crew outside the earthly sphere for the sake of their small exploratory steps marking a giant leap for mankind. The iconography of the first landing on the moon blended American ideologies of individual and national expansion, progress, and achievement with universal narratives and mythologies of unlimited power, surpassing human boundaries, and literally reaching out for the stars.

The pictures of the first human beings on the moon participate in an archive of visual representations of scenes of landing and arrival in American history and culture whose transcultural and transnational trajectories have become intricately interwoven with national (ist) American lineages and traditions of visual self-conceptions over the course of the centuries. Following especially Theodore de Bry’s late sixteenth-century engravings of the transnational moment of the first encounter of Christopher Columbus with the supposedly New World on 12 October 1492, representations of the arrival of the Spaniards in what came to be known as “America” (Figure 19.1) circulated widely throughout Europe since the early modern period of discoveries and conquests and provided the repertoire for innumerable pictorial representations of first encounter scenes with frequently imperialist but always mythologically foundational implications. John Vanderlyn’s historical painting “The Landing of Columbus” (1847) commissioned by the United States Congress for the Rotunda of the Capitol and, especially, Henry Sargent’s less well-known but equally monumental “Landing of the Fathers” (1815) depicting the arrival of the first Puritan immigrants to New England in Plymouth harbor on 22 December 1620 and still on display in Pilgrim Hall Museum in Plymouth, MA (Figure 19.2) illustrate the productivity and power of the repertoire in two highly visible representations of the two most conspicuous arrival scenes in
American history and culture. To which extent their composition, their constellation of figures, their iconographic motifs, and especially their salient gesture of planting a flag as a gesture of appropriation and dominance partake in the transnational storehouse of renditions of arrivals, landings, and conquests in other parts of the world and by colonizing powers other than the Spanish and the British can be illustrated, e.g. by Charles Davidson Bell’s mid-nineteenth-century painting of the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck in Table Bay as a historical re-imagination of the Dutch foundation of Cape Town, South Africa, on 6 April 1652.

The possessive gesture of raising the national flag remained productive in American iconography beyond the realm of historical engravings and paintings of scenes of colonial
encounters. In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it emerged most prominently in Joe Rosenthal’s famous photograph of U.S. marines raising the American Flag on Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima, on 23 February 1945 (Figure 19.3), which marked the strategically important and widely glorified occupation of the Japanese island of Iwo Jima towards the end of World War II in the Pacific and which corresponds in its visual rhetoric and political significance to, e.g. Yevgeny Khaldei’s equally famous photographs of the Soviet flag over various symbolic sites in Berlin, especially over the German Reichstag and the Brandenburg Gate, in early May 1945. The act of raising the national U.S.-American flag re-emerged with recognizable reverberations of the historical moment of the conquest of Iwo Jima after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 when Thomas E. Franklin’s photograph of New York fire-fighters setting up an American flag in Ground Zero circulated to the medially connected world a message of ideological affirmation, military determination, patriotic glory, and envisioned future victory at a moment of collective insecurity and national crisis—a visual statement of self-confidence and self-assurance that was soon incorporated into the archive of collective American memory via a 45-cent postal stamp.

The power and impact of Franklin’s 9/11 picture as well as the political clout and cultural capital of the historical paintings and photographs of scenes of colonial American encounters and American explorations in space result to a considerable extent from their investment with the semiotic and semantic potential of the transnational and transcultural iconographic archives they emerge from and participate in. The iconic pictures introduced in the previous
interpictorial cluster indicate in a paradigmatic manner how projections of “America” and representations of “Americans” are quite frequently and conspicuously embedded in a wide array of visual traditions, conventions, exchanges, and repertoires whose potential of signification and meaning transcends their specific American contexts and archives (see Groseclose and Wierich 2009; Hebel 2013, 2015; Sperling 2011). The scope and depth of their complex semiotic structure and semantic potential rather show affinities with defining ideas and perspectives of Transnational American Studies (see Fishkin 2005; Hebel 2012). Metaphors of America and the United States as a crossroads and turntable of different and multifarious cultures as well as concepts of the spaces, processes, and products of “American” culture as participating in and entangled by global mobilities, transcontinental exchanges, and intercultural flows provide promising perspectives and approaches for interpictorial readings of iconic pictures of “America” as crossroads and trajectories of transnational iconographies.

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Visual representations of “America” and visual constructions of “American” identities and U.S.-American ideologies had long been an integral part of the interdisciplinary cultural studies agenda and cultural history project of American Studies when W.J.T. Mitchell proclaimed what came to be known as the iconic turn or pictorial turn in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, Mitchell’s emphasis on the agency, functionality, and historical and cultural
specificity of images has supported the emergence—in view of developments in Art History in general and German Bildwissenschaft in particular (see Alexander et al. 2012; Böhm 2006, 2015; Sachs-Hombach 2009; Schulz 2009), the re-emergence—of notions, concepts, and practices of iconography (see Baert 2012; Büttner 2017; Eisner and Lorenz 2012; Grbich 2015; Kopp-Schmidt 2004; Poeschel 2010; Taylor 2008). Individual items of visual culture, including time-honored masterpieces of allegedly singular artistry and standing, are considered as intricately located in corresponding, at times competing if not conflicting iconographic traditions and cultural imaginaries. The interest of iconographic approaches in the position of the individual work of visual art in diachronic and synchronic networks of repertoires and conventions can be taken to relate to the focus of American Studies on context, situation, and function, even more so within the theoretical frames of Transnational American Studies and their perspectives on the transcultural flow and circulation of cultural products, the transnational interwovenness of national discourses, and the position, role, and perception of the United States in the world.

It is in these larger contexts that the concept of interpictoriality engages the historical and cultural mobility of powerful pictures as well as the possible political and social impact and function of particular images and repertoire conventions at large. It foregrounds visual dialogs, exchanges, and negotiations whose diverse manifestations have long been considered in Art History in terms and categories such as, e.g. imitation, parody, quotation, variation. Similar to notions of intertextuality and intermediality, interpictoriality goes beyond the mere documentation and description of sources, relations, and influences; it rather emphasizes the semiotic and semantic implications of the frame(s) of reference and of the act(s) of signification added to the respective image by means of its interpictorial rhetoric (see Isekenmeyer 2013; Hebel 2015; Rose 2011; Von Rosen 2003). The interpictorial reading of a specific visual representation underscores the functionality and interpretive value of the semantic surplus produced by its participation in and, particularly significant, possible transformation and resignification of larger visual and cultural conventions, repertoires, traditions, and archives.

In terms of their semiotic structure, interpictorially charged pictures are hybrid systems of signification with both referential and symbolic functions. They are semantically determined and indeterminate at the same time and they contain within their own material sites and frames a possibly limitless network of multi-layered, palimpsest-like options for re-cognition. Interpictorially charged visuals can be considered metapictures which, by their very definition and composition, complicate assumptions about the immediate accessibility and comprehension of pictures and which may expose the possibly manipulative structures and strategies of their own uses. Interpictorially loaded representations are tangible sites and manifestations of the historical and cultural circulation and exchange of motifs, repertoires, and conventions, and they are themselves material agents and performative enactments in processes of cultural and intercultural transfer and negotiation. The concept of interpictoriality is therefore particularly well suited to make Transnational American Studies explorations of national and transnational American narratives and their political, social, economic, and cultural implications interact with the concerns of Art History and Visual Culture Studies with iconographic conventions, traditions, and archives.

The practice of interpictorial readings reflects approaches to iconography and iconology as developed most influentially by Erwin Panofsky between 1932 and 1955, i.e., initially while he was still living and working in Germany and then mainly after his transatlantic exile and immigration to America in the wake of the Nazi reign of terror. Panofsky outlines an interpretive trajectory that moves in three stages from the pre-iconographical description of recognizable empirical givens and experiences in the picture under consideration, to the iconographical tracing and documentation of the representational conventions, motif clusters, and archival repertoires it is embedded in, and, finally, to the iconological interpretive
synthesis exploring its possible meaning and significance as well as cultural, social, and political impact. Interpictorial relations are established and analysed on Panofsky’s second and third stages and are located between what Panofsky calls iconographic and iconological interpretation. Panofsky’s perspectives and procedures enhance our understanding of interpictorially charged pictures as both storehouses and generators of meaning. Interpictorially charged pictures partake actively—in a culturally, socially, and politically significant way by means of their very enactment of remembering and inscribing—in the visual archives and memories of their own culture and, possibly, in the visual archives and discourses of other cultures. The interpretive practices stress the political and cultural agency and performativity of interpictorially charged pictures (see Hebel 2011; Wulf and Zirfas 2005), which may be further enhanced in and by particular situations and contexts of display.

The individual picture as the material site and repository of possible networks of interpictorial references and relations is a tangible crossroads in the otherwise immaterial and intangible cultural and transcultural mobility and flow of images, cultural imaginaries, and political iconographies. The prismatic condensation of the individual picture and the semiotic trajectories of its composition (see Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; Sturken and Cartwright 2009) contain and project venues for the exploration of (explicit or implicit) processes of generating and transferring meaning and thus for the interpretation of possible processes of cultural and political resignification and re-evaluation. Interpictorial readings perform acts of (re-)situating and (re-)location and aim at revealing the national and possibly transnational contexts and presuppositions governing the visual rhetoric of specific pictures. Interpictorial readings are particularly significant in regard to historical paintings, many of which are as culturally and nationally defining as the examples given above, and in regard to iconic photographs, for whose visibility, prominence, and agency Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites coined the evident description “no caption needed.”

Figure 19.4 John Paul Filo. Mary Ann Vecchio Kneeling over Jeffrey Miller during Kent State Protest Photograph, 4 May 1970. Time 100 Photos.
and which German critic Michael Diers appropriately calls Schlągbilder following photography theorist and photojournalist Henri Cartier-Bresson’s notion of “the decisive moment.”

The example of John Paul Filo’s Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of the Kent State University shooting of 4 May 1970 (Figure 19.4) may serve to illustrate how the iconicity of famous American pictures results from and functions within their particularly given and recognizable historical and cultural contexts and parameters and, at the same time, contains and passes on transnational and transcultural archives with virtually no limits. Filo’s photograph of the fatally wounded student Jeffrey Miller and the desperately screaming student Mary Ann Vecchio kneeling next to him during the violent clash of anti-war protesters and National Guard troops on the Kent State Commons is an “American” picture visibly and recognizably anchored in the cultural matrix of its own specific times, spaces, and conflicts (see Orvell 2003; Kroes 2007). Simultaneously, its obvious allusions to Michelangelo’s Pietà of 1498–1500 and the momentous repertoire emerging from the artist’s proverbial Madonna sculpture underscore and foreground the photograph’s transcultural dimensions and transnational implications (also see Szlezák 2016). The interpictorial cluster informing and framing Filo’s photograph, including similarly iconic photographs, e.g. by Jürgen Henschel of the killing of German student protester Benno Ohnesorg in Berlin on 2 June 1967, by Sam Nzima of the killing of twelve-year-old Hector Pieterson during the high school student uprising in Soweto, South Africa on 16 June 1976, or by Samuel Aranda of the suffering of a severely wounded young man in Sana’a during protests against the authoritarian regime in Yemen on 15 October 2011, relates the visual representation of the decisive historical moment on the campus of Kent State University not only to various embodiments of the transcultural topos of motherly and female suffering and comforting but also to transnational iconographies of political protest and civic activism (Figure 19.5). The complex allusiveness of John Paul Filo’s photograph illustrates how interpictorial readings transcend comparative approaches towards more multidirectional trans- angular perspectives (see Bauridl and Hebel 2014).
The location of interpictorially charged American images as materially framed repositories and prisms at the crossroads of the circulation, exchange, and negotiation of specific national iconographies (see Haselstein and Ostendorf 2003; Hebel and Wagner 2011; Reynolds and Hutner 2000; Warnke et al. 2011), on the one hand, and larger transcultural and transnational traditions, repertoires, and archives, on the other, can be traced in an exemplary fashion in visual representations of the most transnational of Americans, the U.S.-American president. From the official portraits of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart to the pictorial enactments of the presidency of Barack Obama by former Chief Official White House Photographer and Director of the White House Photo Office, Pete Souza, and into the presidency of Donald Trump, visual representations of American presidents have been politically and ideologically motivated constructions frequently determined by a high degree of national American and transnational interpictoriality. The earliest iconic portrait of an American president, Gilbert Stuart’s Lansdowne Portrait of George Washington of 1796, is certainly momentous in its depiction of the first American president as the prototypical republican citizen serving the newly established democracy and the American people as their elected leader for the constitutional duration of his term in office. The national political imaginaries and iconographies at work in Stuart’s painting gain in meaning and ideological significance in view of Allan Ramsay’s official portrait of George III of 1761/62, which, in obvious contrast and with contrary impetus, is deeply steeped in the iconographic conventions of European monarchical portrait art and in the political and social presuppositions of hereditary royalty (see Depkat 2014).

The presidential iconography of Barack Obama, beginning during the 2008 election campaign and throughout the eight years of his two presidential terms of office, draws significantly from interpictorial frameworks and correspondences which underscore historical lineages and political affinities especially with former presidents Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy and their respective agendas, affiliations, and legacies (see Hebel, “Framing Obama”). What makes the iconography of Barack Obama and his presidency—both perceived as particularly transnational and transcultural by Alfred Hornung—noteworthy in the context of Transnational American Studies is the complex interplay of national American iconographies and imaginaries with transcultural and transnational trajectories additionally evoked by interpictorial references and allusions. Thus, when President Obama was confronted with the need to show competent disaster handling in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon BP oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, his visit to the Louisiana coast on 28 May 2010 was accompanied by pictures that were to present the president in positions of compassionate agency, albeit symbolical and easily recognizable as part of a well-staged choreography. Widely circulated photographs of President Obama at Port Fourchon Beach, LA, show the president bending down in a posture of genuine interest and concern, physically in touch with the immediate consequences of the ecological catastrophe, and supposedly working on the same ground level together with the people along the Gulf Coast shoreline. In its compositional focus on the almost kneeling president and on his pose of concern and compassion, Chuck Kennedy’s official White House picture (Figure 19.6) in particular resembles Cecil Stoughton’s photograph of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s visit to the home of the Fletcher family in Inez County, KY, on 24 April 1964 as part of Johnson’s “war on poverty”-campaign (Figure 19.7). Within the realm of national American political and cultural iconographies, the interpictorial evocation of Stoughton’s photograph places Barack Obama in the tradition of Democratic presidents and their work for the improvement of the living conditions of the common American people.

The one element in the various and differently detailed photographs of President Obama’s visit to Port Fourchon Beach that is additionally significant in the context of interpictorial implications and iconographies is the pair of shoes President Obama is wearing, seemingly accidental and without the laces fully tied. That a shoe is not just a shoe when it gets to the
Figure 19.6 Chuck Kennedy. President Barack Obama at Port Fourchon Beach, LA, 28 May 2010
Official White House Photograph, P052810CK-0235

Figure 19.7 Cecil Stoughton. President Lyndon B. Johnson with Fletcher Family in Inez, KY
Photograph, 24 April 1964. LBJ Presidential Library, C293–1-64.
American president and his family and administration but rather an indication, if not a symbol of (in)appropriateness and (in)sensibility, became only all-too evident in the immediate social media reactions to Melania Trump’s choice of first stilettos and then white sneakers during President Donald Trump’s visit to hurricane-stricken Texas on 29 August 2017 (see The New York Times 2017). From the perspective of American cultural history, President Obama’s working shoes in the Port Fourchon Beach pictures as part of his working apparel may be taken as an allusion to Walker Evans’ iconic photographs of field workers, their poor living conditions, and, repeatedly, their working shoes as taken in Hale County, AL, in 1936 and later prominently included in James Agee’s and Walker Evans’ Let Us Now Praise Famous Men of 1941. The reference to Walker Evans’ photographs inscribes Chuck Kennedy’s picture and the other photographs taken of President Obama on Port Fourchon Beach in the visual archive of American social photography of the 1930s and its respective ideological implications and presuppositions. This very visual repertoire had already framed Stoughton’s photograph of Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964. Its repeated evocation in 2010 makes Barack Obama even more look like a common man president in the traditions of the Democratic Party and subtly underscores the affinities between Barack Obama and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

In addition to U.S.-American political and cultural iconographies, President Obama’s shoes on the Louisiana Gulf Coast beach and their allusion to Walker Evans’ photographs of working shoes (see Hebel 2015, 404–408; Hebel 2016, 342–345) may also activate more far-reaching, transcultural, and transangular links and point to Vincent Van Gogh’s painting of a pair of shoes of 1886 as a possible interpictorial frame of reference for Chuck Kennedy’s photograph and other Port Fourchon Beach pictures of President Obama. Van Gogh’s painting has given rise to numerous interpretations by, e.g. Martin Heidegger, Meyer Shapiro, and Jacques Derrida, which emphasize, in different ways and on different philosophical and existential premises, Van Gogh’s artistically reductive representation of the human condition (see Batchen 2009). Considered in such interpictorially evoked transcultural and multidirectional contexts, Obama’s social work on the Louisiana Gulf Coast takes on more universal dimensions. The U.S.-American president and Nobel Prize Winner of 2009 is rendered not only as caring for the American people at a moment of crisis but as shouldering the existential burden of the globalized world.

Pete Souza’s photograph of President Obama on the steps of the terrace of the U.S. Ambassador’s residence in Paris on 7 June 2009 (Figure 19.8) depicts the U.S.-American president also on the ground, yet not at home but abroad. The interpictorial potential of Souza’s widely-reproduced photograph challenges conventional vertical poses of rulers and monarchs by the representation of the U.S.-American president in a relaxed, reclining pose and by the implications of a non-hierarchical conversation and democratic order which is particularly supported by the depiction of one advisor wearing casual clothes and sneakers. Souza’s interpictorially loaded picture plays with time-honored European visual traditions and repertoires which render monarchs and leaders of different kinds surrounded by their mostly subservient and anything but casually clad advisors. It furthermore evokes Raphael’s fresco “The School of Athens” of 1509–11 (Figure 19.9) whose interpictorial trajectory makes the reclining Obama become the lying Diogenes surrounded in an almost intimate constellation by his closest advisors, just like Diogenes is surrounded by the giants of ancient philosophy in Raphael’s iconic rendition.

The extent to which interpictorial strategies have continuously governed transnationally significant visualizations of Barack Obama from his first presidential campaign, throughout his presidency, and into his activities as a former president is borne out by photographs of his
Figure 19.8 Pete Souza. President Obama outside the U.S. Ambassador’s Residence, Paris, 7 June 2009
Official White House Photograph, P060709PS-0186.

Figure 19.9 Raphael. The School of Athens. Fresco, 1509–11
Apostolic Palace, Vatican City.
visits to Berlin in 2008, 2013, and 2017. Ever since President John F. Kennedy’s visit to Berlin in June 1963 produced globally iconic and widely recycled photographs of his “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech in front of the Rathaus Schöneberg and of his quasi-mythic tour of the divided city and the area around the Brandenburg Gate, his successors in office over a time period of more than 50 years have been keen to follow him with equally successful visits to Berlin and with equally iconic pictures at the Brandenburg Gate (see Bauridl 2014; Mack 2013). While still on the campaign trail in June 2008, the presidential candidate Barack Obama was only allowed to speak at the Siegessäule by the German government and thus only in distant view of the preferred location of the Brandenburg Gate. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Kennedy’s visit to Berlin, President Obama finally spoke publicly from a platform in front of the Brandenburg Gate on 19 June 2013 (Figure 19.10) and could thus be visualized with the desired transnational symbol of American ideologies and values of freedom and democracy looming large and conspicuously in the background (see Frame 2012). When former president Barack Obama visited Berlin again for the Deutsche Evangelische Kirchentag in the year of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation on 25 May 2017, photographs of a welcoming crowd at the Brandenburg Gate inscribed the repeated visit into the visual archive of U.S.-American presidential travels to Berlin and at the same time established a stark contrast to rather different pictures of current U.S. President Donald Trump visiting the NATO headquarters at Brussels on the very same day and, later in early July, attending the 2017 G20 summit in the German city of Hamburg.

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The practice of interpreting interpictorial “American” pictures and of tracing and mapping interpictorial clusters informing and governing representations of “America” and of “Americans” blends approaches and perspectives of iconography and iconology with the emphasis of Transnational American Studies on trajectories of mobility and impact.
and on processes and products of appropriation and transformation across and beyond culturally and nationally given or enforced boundaries (see Greenblatt et al. 2010; Kunow 2011). Janice Radway’s stress on “intricate interdependencies,” Jane Desmond’s notion of “prismatic American Studies,” and Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s call for the development of transnational Deep Maps (Digital Palimpsest Mapping Projects / DPMP; see Fishkin 2012) suggest conceptual affinities between the theoretical parameters of Transnational American Studies and Aby Warburg’s monumental project of a “picture atlas Mnemosyne” as the historical and academic starting point for iconographical and iconological studies in early twentieth-century Europe. Interpictorial readings explore the semiotic and semantic potential and agency of visual representations beyond the site and boundaries of their own enclosing frame and materiality. They reveal the mobility and circulation of transnational iconographic conventions, repertoires, and memories within and across the repositories of “American” pictures, iconographies, and visual archives; they uncover transcultural trajectories of impact, scrutinize processes of appropriation and reappropriation, and address the political significance of possible enactments of interpictorial signification and resignification. Engaging powerful “American” pictures and the political, social, and cultural agency of U.S.-American national iconographies within the conceptual and theoretical framework of Transnational American Studies foregrounds the transnational interwovenness of national American visual discourses and the position and role of “American” pictures and pictures of “Americans” in the globalized world.

In its edition of 7 July 2017, in the midst of heated controversies over President Donald Trump’s plan to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexican border, the Los Angeles Times reported that the infamous California Department of Transportation road sign designed by Caltrans graphic artist and member of the Navajo nation John Hood and put up along Interstate 5 in 1990 in order to alert drivers to the possible danger of Mexican immigrants crossing the lanes of southern California freeways on their way into the United States had all but disappeared (see Carcamo 2017). Once the last single sign still standing in the summer of 2017 would also have gone, be it because of an accident, a storm, or a protest action, the iconic sign would not be replaced – and so it happened as the Los Angeles Times reported on 10 February 2018 (see Morrissey). What had become the site and agent of widespread interpictorial parody, projection, and protest of a most diversified quality, mediality, and materiality immediately following its first and contested erection—and what has been included by means of a photographic documentation in the archival exhibition of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History as a lasting metaphor for undocumented immigration to the United States—may be taken as a visual rendition and framing of an “American” transnational arrival scene of a different kind, context, and iconicity. Its continued interpictorial manifestations and reverberations will remember and possibly transform both the original visual representation and the specific political ideologies and cultural perceptions from which it emerged even though the actual last road sign has now vanished.

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Iconography, interpictoriality, and TAS


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