



185. **Vik Muniz**,  
*Action Photo 1*, 1997.  
Vik Muniz copied this photograph  
of the abstract expressionist  
painter Jackson Pollock by Hans  
Namuth by drawing the image  
in chocolate syrup and then  
photographing it. This suitably  
dripping re-presentation of the  
famous artist makes for a dynamic  
mental relay: we recognize this as  
a photograph of a drawing of a  
photograph of, what has become,  
a syrupy mystification of the  
creative act of the artist.

Since at least the mid-1970s, the theory of photography has been concerned with the idea that photographs can be understood as processes of signification and cultural coding. Postmodernist analysis has offered alternative ways for understanding the meaning of photographs outside the tenets of modernist perspectives. Modernism had predominantly considered photography in terms of its authorship and the aesthetic and technical developments and innovations of the medium, which was seen to have a discrete and inner logic to it. The effect of modernist criticism was to create a canon of master practitioners, a history of trailblazers driving photography's capacities, the 'few' who could be distinguished from the 'many' everyday producers of photographs. In photography's modernist canon, the few are those who typify formal and intellectual transcendence over the functional, jobbing, vernacular and popular anonymity of most photographic production. Postmodernism, in contrast, considered photography from a different standpoint, one that was not intended to serve the construction of a pantheon of photographic creators that mirrored those established for painting and sculpture. Instead, it examined the medium in terms of its production, dissemination and reception, and engaged with its inherent reproducibility, mimicry and falsity. Rather than being evidence of the photographer's originality (or lack of it) or statements of authorial intention, photographs were seen as *signs* that acquired their significance or value from their place within the larger system of social and cultural coding. Heavily influenced by the principles of structural linguistics and its philosophical off-shoots structuralism and post-structuralism, particularly as formulated by French thinkers such as Roland Barthes (1915–80) and Michel Foucault (1926–84), this theory postulated that the meaning of any image was not of its author's making or necessarily under his or her control, but was determined only by reference to other images or signs.