

Michael Ray Charles,
Cut and Paste,
acrylic on paper,
60 x 35 inches, 1994.
Courtesy of the artist and
Tony Shafrazi Gallery, NYC.

Interpreting Connotations in Visual Culture

Denotations and connotations are at play in all of visual and verbal communication, and their consequences can be much more serious than designers' attempts at influencing our choices of which fashions to desire and acquire. Michael Ray Charles, for example, is a contemporary African-American artist who in his paintings employs and unmasks connotations of racism in commonly used denotations of African-American subjects. This article shows how teachers, college students, middle-school students, and preschoolers have deconstructed a painting by Charles, a cover of a *Rolling Stone* magazine, printed tee-shirts, cereal boxes, and teddy bears by using the construct of denotations and connotations as an interpretive strategy to better understand, evaluate, and enjoy the visually constructed world in which they live.

Roland Barthes (1915-1980), the French semiotician and literary critic, investigated how material items of culture signify and express meaning and analyzed many kinds of "texts" in popular culture, including fashion, wrestling, and advertisements. While studying magazine advertisements, he identified two signifying practices: *denotations* and *connotations*. To

Interpreting Visual Culture

BY TERRY BARRETT

illustrate the distinction between denotations and connotations, Barthes (1977) provided his interpretive analysis of a photographic magazine ad for Panzani spaghetti products that appeared in a French magazine. The ad shows cellophane packages of uncooked spaghetti, a can of tomato sauce, a cellophane package of Parmesan cheese, and tomatoes, onions, peppers, and mushrooms emerging from an open string shopping bag. Yellows and greens predominate against a red background. The Panzani label is on the can and cellophane packages. Barthes identifies three parts of the ad: the linguistic message, the denoted image, and the connoted image. The linguistic message is the word *Panzani*, which is both denotational and connotational. Barthes explains that the word denotes a brand name of the packaged products, but that it connotes, just by the way it sounds, "Italianicity" for non-Italian speakers. (It would not have that connotation in Italy for Italian readers because they would perceive the word as "normal" rather than as "Italian.")

The photographic image itself denotes what it shows: a can, spaghetti packages, mushrooms, peppers, and so forth. Barthes explains that the image connotes several other messages that are implicit. He interprets the connota-

tions of the ad as representing a return from the market and implying two values: freshness of the products and the goodness of home-cooking. The variety of the objects connotes the idea of total culinary service as if Panzani provided everything needed for a carefully prepared, (almost) homemade dish. The photograph of fresh vegetables suggests that the concentrate in the can is equivalent to the vegetables surrounding it. The predominance of red and green, the national colors of Italy, reinforces "Italianicity." The composition, focus, lighting, and color transmit a further value: the aesthetic goodness of a still life.

Art Teachers Interpret a Painting

In his paintings, Michael Ray Charles, himself an African American, overtly refers to offensive denotations of Blacks constructed in the past that have become collectors' items of the present, all with unsavory racial implications. When filmmaker Spike Lee (1998) first saw Charles's work, he said, "His works are one-sheets, posters for movies that Hollywood would never have the courage to make, exploring race and sex in this country" (p. 3). Lee then invited Charles to collaborate with him on the movie *Bamboozled*, a satirical film

about resurrecting the minstrel show for primetime TV.

Artist and art writer Calvin Reid (1998) identifies the denotations of Charles's subject matter this way: "Big-lipped little dark pickaninnies with heads full of nappy pigtailed; the happy-go-lucky coon; charcoal dark Little Black Sambo; Aunt Jemima, her head in a kerchief smiling down from the grocery shelves (and don't forget Uncle Ben); watermelon-eating darkies and the evil black thug looking to rob white men and rape white women" (p. 4). These are the images that denigrate and degrade African Americans while feeding racist delusions about the absence of humanity in Blacks: "Charles's appropriated signifiers collide in a reduced version of a kind of race war, without guns but fought with images and the ossified stereotypes still rumbling around the American subconscious" (p. 4).

The consequences of racial stereotyping of African Americans are dreadful. As early as 1944, Lawrence Redneck, an African-American author, identified 19 different and distinct stereotypes assigned to Blacks in images: the savage African, the happy slave, the devoted servant, the corrupt politician, the irresponsible citizen, the petty thief, the social delinquent, the vicious criminal, the sexual superman,

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the unhappy non-White, the natural-born cook, the natural-born musician, the perfect entertainer, the superstitious church-goer, the chicken and watermelon eater, the razor and knife toter, the uninhibited expressionist, and the mental inferior (in Kern-Foxworth, 1997, p. 8).

A group of art teachers¹ readily deciphered one of Charles's artworks by applying the interpretive strategy of denotations and connotations to *Cut and Paste*, a black-and-white painting made in 1994. The teachers recognized in the painting many of the stereotypes identified by Redneck. According to the teachers analyzing the image, *Cut and Paste* satirically asks us to attach our own stereotypical connotations onto the denotations accompanying Sambo. Onto the paper doll we may paste a football, hair pick, knife, handgun, chicken, purse, banana, or tie. When conjuring a Black man, a racist first reduces him to a Sambo with shorts, white gloves, and black face, vaguely reminiscent of Mickey Mouse. Mickey himself is a derivative of a minstrel show character. A racist may then choose to fear the Black man by attaching to him a gun or a knife, and adding a purse, presumably snatched from a White woman. Or the racist may offer a false compliment to the Black man by acknowledging his athletic prowess with a football, while degrading him to a figure of brawn without brain, who has only recently emerged from the jungle. The group of teachers offered an interpretive conclusion about the painting: The Black male, even with hair picked and adorned with a necktie, will never outrun the connotations of the images with which he has been identified.

Marilyn Kern-Foxworth (1997) wrote in fictional first-person singular to interpret the connotations of Charles's images as if she were speaking for the artist: "You can see me and you can see that I am black, but you don't really know who I am. Is your vision so clouded that you totally miss my intelligence? Were your eyes so blinded by distorted depictions that you have

missed my infinite beauty? Were your shallow minds so threatened by my raw ambition that you missed my genius? I am constantly and consistently re-envisioning your vision of who you think I am" (p. 8). After the teachers interpreted *Cut and Paste*, they too, like Kern-Fox, were in a position to intellectually and emotionally identify with the tragic meaning of the artwork.

Future Art Teachers Interpret a Magazine Cover

Barthes's (1997) schema of denotations and connotations can be taught to students of all ages who can apply them to all images with and without text. The schema are simple and powerful means of interpreting images. Following is an example of the use of denotations and connotations by undergraduate art education students² to interpret a magazine cover featuring the popular music group "Destiny's Child." The discussion lasted about 45 minutes. The class of approximately 25 students was broken into sub-groups of 5 and provided with actual-size color copies of the magazine cover. They first identified denotations and for about 20 minutes interpreted the connotations of the denotations and then shared their insights with the whole class.

The Denoted Image. These are the denotations the students identified on the cover of *Rolling Stone*: three women, seemingly African American, with light brown skin, and slim and fit bodies. The two women on the left gaze down at us, while the woman on the right looks over our heads above our right shoulders. Two of the women have their lips parted, while the third keeps hers closed. The woman in the middle smiles slightly, raising an eyebrow and tilting her head to the right. Each of them has long, carefully coifed hair: the one on the left has dark hair streaked with red, the one in middle is blonde, and the one to the right has long, curly black hair. Their faces are lightly made up with cosmetics. Each has manicured fingernails. The women are attractive by conventional standards. The one in

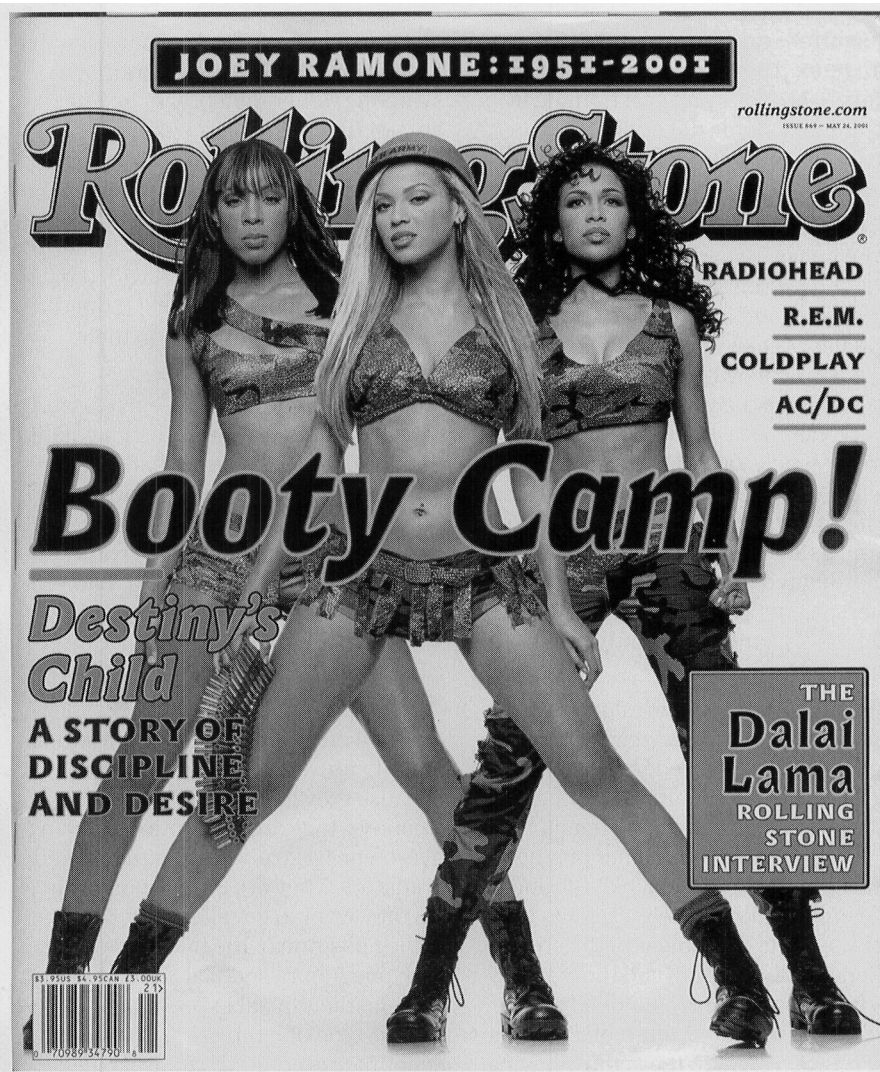


Photo by Albert Watson from *Rolling Stone*, May 24, 2001.
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the middle wears a green helmet that says "U. S. Army" on its front, and all three are scantily dressed in pseudo-camouflage attire that includes fabric adorned with sequins. All three wear brief halter-tops, two wear short shorts, and one wears long, tight-fitting pants with designed tears in them. All three wear similar clean and shiny black leather boots with laces. The woman in the middle holds a belt of large-caliber bullets. Her pierced navel is visible, and her cleavage is apparent. The woman on the right has one hand visible, clenched in a fist. The three stand with legs spread wide, the two outer women are standing firm on the floor, but the middle woman tilts her left foot from the floor. The background is white and

blank except for reflections of the women's boots on the shiny white.

The Linguistic Message. The students identified the denoted text: Across the mid-section of the women in outlined and italicized letters is the phrase "Booty Camp!," beneath it in small type is "Destiny's Child," and beneath it in smaller and different type in caps is "A STORY OF DISCIPLINE AND DESIRE." The students know that "Destiny's Child" identifies a rock group composed of the three women pictured on the cover. Some of the students know the women's names, and some are aware that the group has survived internal squabbles and break-ups. At the top of the magazine is a black banner: "Joey Ramone: 1951-2001," and

they quickly decode this as a tribute to a musician who has recently passed away. The *Rolling Stone* masthead is behind the women's heads and partially blocked but still recognizable to the students. Under and to the right of the masthead are four lines of type: "Radiohead," "R.E.M.," "Coldplay," and "AC/DC," which denote, to some of us, musical groups, and that there are stories about these groups within this issue of the magazine. In a rectangle in the lower right of the magazine is a red box with "The Dalai Lama *Rolling Stone* Interview," which denotes editorial content within the magazine. The students noticed the ironic contrast between the physicality of *Booty Camp!* and the Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual and political leader of Tibet that has been overtaken by China.

During the class discussion, defining the word *booty* was a challenge, probably because we were a mix of females and males. The students said that *booty* referred to *loot* as in a pirate's captured treasure, but that the word also referred to female anatomy, specifically buttocks, and generally to having sex as in the phrase "booty call." The students believe the term was first popular among African Americans and that it has now "crossed over" into white culture. They deciphered *camp*

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straightforwardly as an outdoor place with tents. They knew that *boot camp* refers to arduous physical training in the military. Some did not know who the Dalai Lama was.

The Connoted Image. The students deciphered the following connotations in the image: Because the women reveal a lot of bare skin, and their crotches are paramount and emphasized by the triangles of their spread legs, and because the words *Booty Camp!* are placed above the women's crotches, below their breasts, and across their bare stomachs, attention is drawn to sexual anatomy. The pictured women invite titillating visual exploration. Any musical talents they may have are subordinated to their physical sexuality. Whereas boot camp prepares one to fight, booty camp apparently prepares these three for sex.

By her position in the middle and in front of the other two, the woman at the center appears the leader of the three. She holds the ammunition. Her legs are also spread the widest. The female students in my class read her posture and expression as "flirty, playful, and revealing weakness." My students know that she is the lead singer of the group called Destiny's Child, and those who are familiar with current pop music culture tell us that "A story of discipline and desire" refers to these three having the discipline and desire to stay together as a group, surviving internal disputes within their group, which was once larger in number. Some in the class know that their attire also makes connections to their hit song "Survivor" that is the theme song for the "reality-based" TV show of the same name, popular at the time.

The projected sexuality of the women is ambiguous. Their gaze is toward the viewer and not toward one another. The text of "discipline and desire" could imply that the women are sexually dominant and afford pleasure of a sadomasochistic sort, but they hold no items such as whips that are usually the coded signs of sadomasochism. They reveal their conventionally attractive bodies in sexually provocative

ways, yet they are dressed and armed for battle. Their aggressive attire is symbolic rather than practical: These are not the clothes one would want to wear, were one in a physically violent fight in either a natural or urban theater of war. Their attire is better suited for a battle among the sexes. They attract with their bodies and repel with their aggressive attire and stance. If they are to engage in sex, it will be on their terms, or there will be a fight.

The pictured women seem to assert that they are in charge of their sexuality. Some students observed that this musical group is part of a trend toward "girl power" and associate Destiny's Child with Power Puff, Spice Girls, Britney Spears, and Christina Aguilera, groups and singers currently popular who also present themselves as physically fit, kick-boxing women who are strong as well as sexy.

The women of Destiny's Child wear military attire and have bullets, but because they have no guns or other weapons, they are susceptible to being overcome by stronger or better-armed predators. They are merely posturing. Do they want to be taken? Their dress, the leg position of the middle woman with one foot raised that destabilizes her, and their facial expressions suggest so. The type of interaction that they encourage is connoted to be sexually aggressive and emotionally shallow.

The students experienced the entire cover of *Rolling Stone* as a field of conflicting signs and values competing for attention, dominated by an ambiguous image of sexuality and desire. They realized that everything on the cover is coded and in need of interpretation. It also became apparent to us that codes are open to some and closed to others because of culture, age, gender, and familiarity with current and past events: Some of us knew about the Dalai Lama and not about Power Puff. Thus, we learned that it is a great advantage to decode and interpret items of visual culture in a community of diverse interpreters. As a class, we were engaged in rendering clearly the messages and values of a magazine

cover and went away from the class more aware of cultural signifying practices and values embedded in constructed signs.

Interpreting Tee-Shirts, Teddy Bears, Cereal Boxes

Middle-school students. In the fall, during football season, many seventh-grade boys and girls came to school wearing either Ohio State University or University of Michigan tee-shirts and sweatshirts. These two large universities in the region share a competitive athletic rivalry. As a visiting art critic to a school in northern Ohio,³ I set aside my lesson plan for the seventh graders and spontaneously engaged them in the “deconstruction” of their university apparel. During our 45-minute class discussion, the students readily understood the concept of denotational and connotational meaning. They were able to apply the construct after they heard a quick explanation of the two terms: “*Denotations* are what you literally see in a picture; *connotations* are what the things and words imply or suggest by what they show and how they show it.”

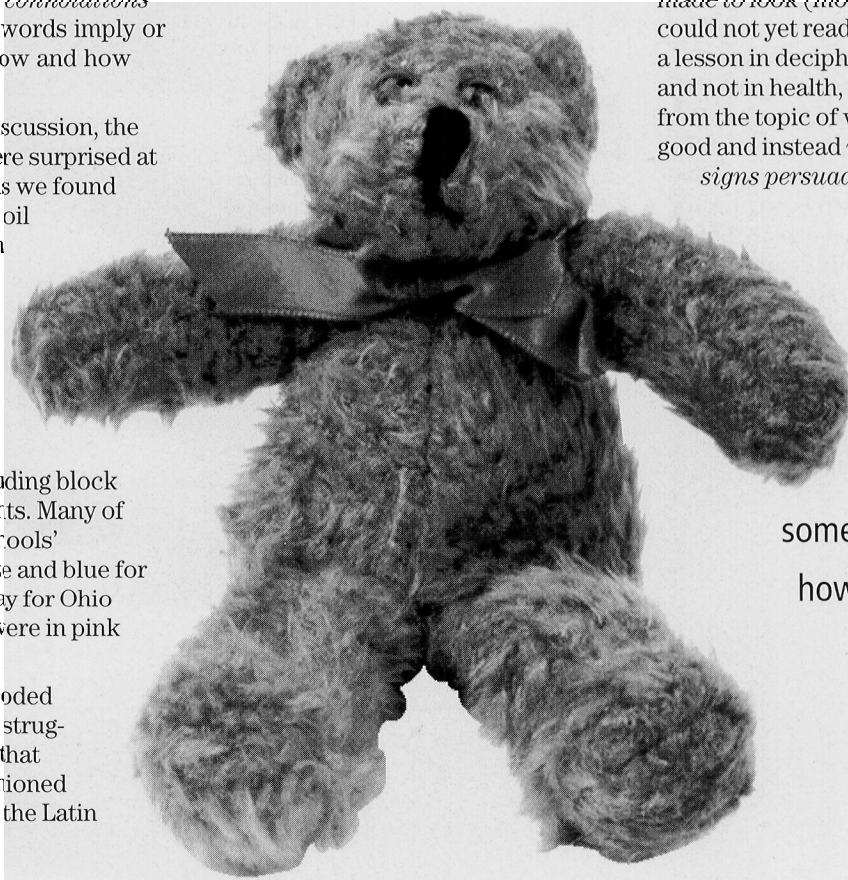
In the course of our discussion, the seventh graders and I were surprised at the variety of denotations we found on their shirts, including oil lamps, open books, Latin words and phrases, tie-dyed colors, tape-wrapped hands of football players, football helmets; M, U of M, and OSU in large letters but in many different typefaces, including block letters and frilly italic fonts. Many of the shirts were in the schools’ traditional colors—maize and blue for Michigan, scarlet and gray for Ohio State—but other shirts were in pink and powder blue.

The students ably decoded most of the denotations, struggling over Latin phrases that accompanied an old-fashioned oil lamp, but interpreted the Latin

words and the lamp as connoting a tradition of academic excellence and seriousness. They read the tie-dye as a reference to “hippies,” psychedelic drugs, and partying. In our discussion, the students readily reached consensus on the denotation of footballs, helmets, and taped hands, but they noted contradictions between the implied violence of these denotations and the soft colors of the shirts that abandoned the traditional school colors. The students were also able to read the connotations of the different typefaces: bold and blocky like linemen; sleek and fast like offensive and defensive backs; and old typefaces like the academic tradition. By the end of the discussion, we were all impressed with how many different kinds of denotations the shirts bore and how many different connotations common items like school logo-shirts can carry.

Kindergarteners. Very young learners are also able to utilize the interpretive construct of denotations and connotations, but without needing to

know those terms. When I visited an Ohio kindergarten, the children were quickly and easily able to correctly respond to my request that they sort a variety of cereal boxes I brought to their classroom into two groups: “cereals for adults” and “cereals for children.” After they sorted the boxes, they answered the question of how they knew which cereals were for which people. They attended to the connotations of the imagery on the boxes: cute bears with honey dippers, cartoon-like tigers, three little-people with cute faces and charming clothes that the kindergartners identified as Snap, Crackle, and Pop, and pictures of toys that could be retrieved from within the boxes. They also noted the lack of such pictures on the “adult cereals,” seeing instead bowls filled with flakes, fresh fruits, and milk or with dark brown flakes and raisins; coupons to save money; and smiling ladies with slim waists. The students learned that the boxes were intentionally and carefully *designed to appeal* to different groups by how the boxes were *made to look* (most of the students could not yet read the words). This was a lesson in deciphering visual culture and not in health, so we stayed away from the topic of what was nutritionally good and instead *we focused on how signs persuade*.



“If bears are dangerous and sometimes eat people, how come your bears are not scary?”

Preschool children. Learners as young as 3 and 4 years of age were also able to use the construct of denotations and connotations, if not the terms, by deciphering the connotations of the denotations of their stuffed animals. Sitting in a circle on the floor with their favorite toy animal, in a group discussion that lasted about 20 minutes, they observed that many of them had teddy bears. We attended to the bears, first answering, one at a time, the request to tell us about the features of their bears. Individually and as a group, they noted generalities and differences denoted by the physical features of the teddy bears: the bears were soft, round, nice to touch, easy to hug. Most of the bears were different shades of brown, but one was white and another was black; some had tails, some did not; some wore bows; some had eyes of glass; some had plastic noses, and some were made of dark thread. After identifying the denoted features of the bears, the preschoolers addressed their bears' connotations by answering this essential question: "If bears are dangerous and sometimes eat people, how come your bears are not scary?" They answered the question by adroitly attending to the visual and tactile features utilized by the designers of the toys, comparing what they knew of live bears to their designed toys, saying, for example: "Real bears have teeth, but my teddy bear doesn't," and "Bears are big, but our teddy bears are small, and you can hold them." This was a simple, brief, and joyful lesson that engaged children in appreciating their beloved toys in new ways, during which they became more sensitive to expressive visual qualities in their lives.

Conclusion

Learners of all ages can successfully decipher the many messages circulating in the images and objects of visual culture if given the opportunities and some strategies. Knowledge of the culture in which we live and how it functions is its own reward. It is also immensely important that we interpret the images and designed objects with which we live. Images and objects present opinions as if they were truth, reinforce attitudes, and confirm or deny beliefs and values. If the messages carried by visual culture are not interpreted, we will be unwittingly buying, wearing, promoting, and otherwise consuming opinions with which we may or may not agree.

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FOOTNOTES

¹*Cut and Paste* was the subject of a group discussion during a 45-minute presentation by the author, "Multiple Interpretations of Single Works of Art," at the convention of the National Art Education association, Miami Beach, March 24, 2002.

²Brian Arnold, Sarah Arruda, Irene Atwood, Kristopher Blausey, Shirley Brown, Katie Clary, Erica Godfrey, Keeley Hancox, KaraHasbrouck, Katie Hofacker, Sandra Janik, Brandi Kasprzak, Jennifer Kozman, Valerie Kulick, Rebecca Lawhun, Alexis Leventhal, Linda McAnarney, Andrea Motil, Heather O'Neil, Laurie Pitz, Becca Reiman, Karen Russell, Amy Santo farraro, Jamie Stenger, Kristy Venne, and Tiffany Wilson, students in the Department of Art Education, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Spring 2002.

³Cloverleaf Middle School, Lodi, Ohio, Jann Gallagher, host teacher, 1991.

⁴Sands Montessori School, Cincinnati Public Schools, Ohio, Georgie Ann Daub-Grosse, host teacher, 1992.