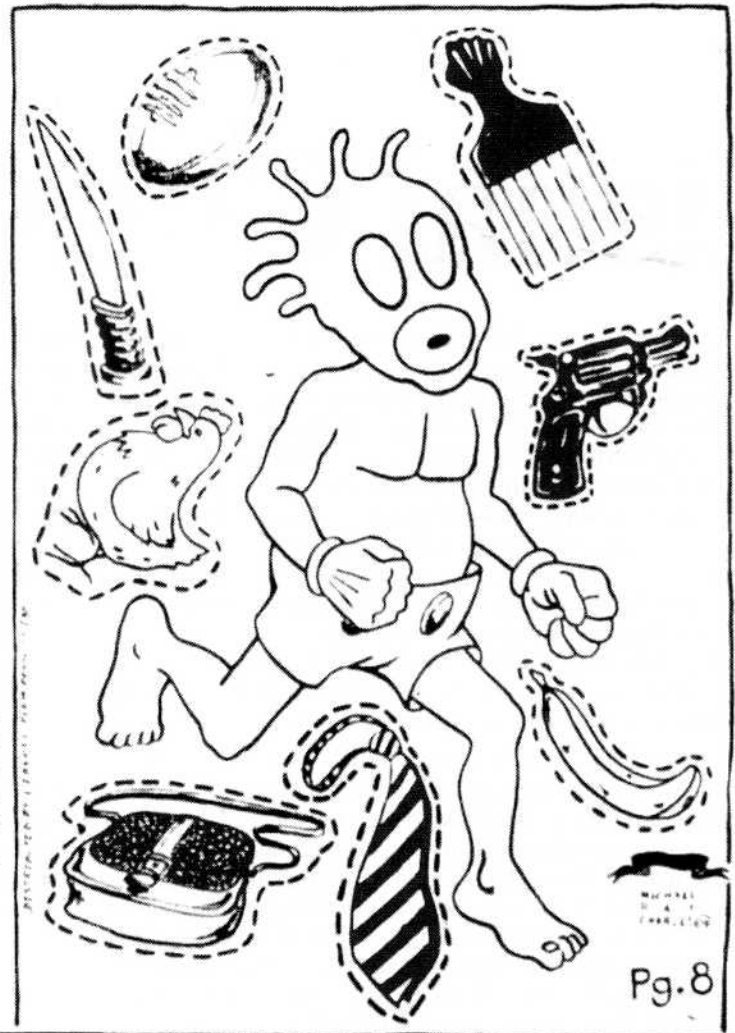


Michael Ray Charles,
Cut and Paste,
 acrylic on paper,
 60 x 35 inches, 1994.
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, NYC.



CUT AND PASTE

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

