

King James as King Kongⁱ

Robert Hariman and John L. Lucaites contend that the outcomes of a visual rhetorical critique offer much more than just a textual reading of a work and the social and historical context it is set within. Though the importance of those contexts are mammoth, to examine a photograph, film or any other subject that is analyzed optically, is to illuminate a public consciousness or public unconsciousness of deeply rooted fractures in national morality, identity and public memory. That depiction of a common consciousness is constructed intentionally with an ideological adherence imposed by artist, reader and critic. In their rhetorical visual critique of images from the Vietnam War, Hariman and Lucaites emphasize the impact of circulation, which has only increased exponentially since their article “Public Identity and Collective Memory in U.S. Iconic Photography: The Image of “Accidental Napalm,”” was published in 2003. Reproduced images centered around the formation of public memory and national identity during and directly following an unpopular war, any image that causes a nation to question its subjects and creators, reflect on its direction, and reexamine the progress made on collective personal and structural issues like racism, are worthy of rhetorical critique.

The racist image in question is the April 2008 *Vogue* magazine cover for their annual *shape* issue. Representing the best of their body-centric professions, NBA star LeBron James and supermodel Gisele Bündchen posed together in what seems to be an American exemplar of racially intolerant metaphors. James was dressed in simple basketball fare: a black sleeveless tank and shorts, the ball below his large hand with outstretched fingers, and every muscle tensed in a frozen scream. To his left is the beautiful Brazilian supermodel Gisele Bündchen, in a body-hugging silk charmeuse aquamarine gown, her signature wavy blonde hair thrown back from an implied wind, a mega-watt smile and *laissez faire* body language that plays off the strong contrast of James’ stance. The body language of King James and the entire composition of the Annie Leibovitz shot has since been likened to the broad iconography of *King Kong* and a specific World War II Army recruitment poster, contended as reinforcing the racist image of black men as bestial savages and nothing more (Hill, 2008; Shea, 2008; Stewart, 2008; Zaleski, 2008). As Hill (2008) reiterates, the photo may not just be a reverberation of historically embedded racial stereotypes, but yet another file image in the building history of portraying black athletes in media as either hyper-masculine bordering on brutish, or completely emasculated (Shea, 2008; Stewart, 2008; Zaleski, 2008).

A reading with a visual rhetorical lens would suggest that by ignoring or claiming oversensitivity in the media that both produced and reproduced the image, would work to further repress the identification of stereotypes. thus giving them a better chance to become normalized. Gallagher and Zagacki (2005) contend that “abstract political concepts are always relative to the individuals or groups whose lives are most directly affected by their presence or absence,” (p. 175) and despite those best attempts to claim that these patterns are fueling a non-existent fire, the connection between James’ body language and the photos’ composition connect to a larger dialogue about profiling. Since the release of the cover, incidents like the murder of Trayvon Martin point to the dangers of trivialization and prevent serious action and change. Images do not appear without a creator and distributor behind them, and those ideologies are not made within a vacuum. Consumption is not an exclusive process either, and the desire to compartmentalize

King James from King Kong from racism in America as just race talk, is the fastest way to naturalize something as unnatural as the world through the lens of a camera.

References

- Gallagher, V, & Zagacki, K. S. (2005). Visibility and rhetoric: The power of visual images in Norman Rockwell's depictions of civil rights. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 91(2), 175-200.
- Hariman, R. & Lucaites, J. L. (2003). Public identity and collective memory in U.S. iconic photography: The image of "Accidental Napalm". *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 20(1), 35-66.
- Hill, J. (March 21, 2008). "LeBron should be more careful with his image." *ESPN Page 2*. Retrieved from <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=hill/080320>
- Shea, D. (April 5, 2008). "Uncovered: Possible inspiration for controversial LeBron James *Vogue* cover." *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/28/uncovered-possible-inspir_n_93944.html
- Stewart, D. (March 17, 2008). "Is *Vogue*'s "LeBron Kong" cover offensive?" *Jezebel*. <http://jezebel.com/368655/is-vogues-lebron-kong-cover-offensive>
- Zaleski, K. (April 2, 2008). "LeBron James *Vogue* cover criticized for "perpetuating racial stereotypes." *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/25/lebron-james-vogue-cover-_n_93252.html

^{i i} Due to the space constraints of this assignment, this brief conversation is limited to race in regards to James. Equal attention should be paid to the framing of Bundchen and how the composition of the photograph reiterates possible issues concerning her as well.