

Denotation – Connotation lecture notes outline

I. Roland Barthes, a titan in French semiotic theory, gave us the notion of myths - the hidden cultural values and conventions through which meanings are made to seem natural, to seem universal, even though in reality they are specific to certain groups. Think of our culture's "myths" regarding beauty and thinness, for example.

Denotative meaning: Presenting evidence, literal descriptive meaning. A Marlboro advertisement might denote a man riding a horse. Transportation. The man in control of the horse.

Connotative meaning: Relying on the cultural and historical context of the image and its viewers' lived, felt knowledge of those circumstances, evoking a magical, mythical quality. That same Marlboro ad might connote the rugged, masculine American independence of being a cowboy on the open range. Connotation relies on cultural or historical contexts, contexts of both the image and the viewer. For connotation, we observe what the man looks like, what he is wearing, and the context or situation of the rider and horse (a circus, a rodeo, a ranch, the open West).

Think back to the Robert Frank photo of the people on a New Orleans trolley car. What does the photo denote? Passengers on a trolley or train or tram. What does the image connote? And how does the image make these connotations? A journey? Race relations in the American South? Class and privilege? Segregation?

With any image, note where you are going purely on the evidence -- what is actually present, (denotation) -- and when and where you are using evocation, or what is evoked by the image (connotation). You bring a specific experience, background, upbringing and memory to the photo.

Barthes called this second category, what is evoked by the transaction or the negotiation between the image and the viewer as MYTH. It's what we believe. It is what we value, what we don't value in the image. Myth, Barthes believed, had the very real power to appear real, to appear as truth, to appear literal or natural. It is how stereotypes are born.

We are making these transactions, these negotiations ALL THE TIME. And these negotiations are heavily influenced by culture. They are, in other words, culturally specific, and therefore mythic. What seems naturally true in one culture, or by one people, might seem very odd or even wrong to another. And what says one thing at one point in history might say something quite different in another time, even though the image itself has not changed.

We looked at Benetton's flaming car, the Marlboro Man, the stimulus bill cartoon of a dead chimp. Black woman breast-feeding a white baby.

II. New York Post cartoon

"Treat me the same but respect that I am different." – Keith Williams, Poynter



Who is the speaker?

Who is the listener, and how does this affect or change what is seen?

What is the context?

Is the chimp Obama?

Historical context:

HARTFORD, Connecticut (AP) — A 200-pound pet chimpanzee once seen in TV commercials mauled a woman visiting its owner Monday and cornered a police officer in his cruiser before being shot and killed, authorities said. Stamford police Capt. Richard Conklin said the injured woman was hospitalized late Monday in “very serious” condition at Stamford Hospital; her identity was not immediately released. Conklin said she suffered “a tremendous loss of blood” from serious facial injuries. The 15-year-old chimpanzee's owner and two officers also were hurt, though police said the extent of their injuries was not immediately known.

What's in the background? The image's contexts. Semiotics is the field of study that tries to get at this.

The cartoon clearly is racially charged, but the context is selective and interpreted. Apes and monkeys have been used historically to symbolize and disparage blacks and browns in the United States. My children don't share this meaning; they don't know this. But I know this. My parents know this.

The purpose here? Ethical decision-making requires a process. Having diverse people in the room does you know good without a process, without systematic dialogue and conversation.

What is your interpretation if a white males calls someone a 'redneck'? A black male? Does it matter who the speaker is? It makes all the difference.

Blog post:

Write about a time when you were 'The Other.' You didn't fit in. You were excluded.

III. Popeye's

COM 300 IDEA: Popeyes campaign

1. The Annie commercial <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGHFVjeCmhc>
2. College students ad <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZLBptdTLem>
3. Public relations blowup after the Annie ad
4. Possible corporate responses?
5. Fox news coverage in Minneapolis
6. Buffalo coverage Did the Popeyes campaign achieve its goal?

What's missing in the TV coverage? Why is it missing? How does the news coverage play into stereotype, bias? Why is it all a big joke? Who did the station talk to? Who did the reporters not talk to? Who is the 'Other' here? Where is this trend story.

And yet the coverage is true. These people did say these things. This is a truth. What's wrong with this truth?

Human dynamic: I will default to my worst fear. For a black seeing Annie, I fear you are perpetuating Aunt Jemima, so I am going to believe that. If Annie was white? The black stereotype and historical antecedent isn't there. The default fear is gone. Perhaps there will be a gender stereotype or message that emerges, but it's buried behind or under race as constructed.