

Arts-Based Critique of the Media's False Images of Racial Protests

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Abstract

We live in a very visual culture, surrounded by images everywhere we turn. These images, especially in news and advertising, influence our ideals, thoughts, and actions. With my interactive thesis art exhibition, I challenged my audiences' notions of race representation and what makes them think the way they do about race representation and racial protests. By framing the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings in two different perspectives, I opened the conversation up to how media coverage influences the way we perceive events, including the recent coverage of George Floyd's death and subsequent protests in 2020. My creative project emphasized the importance of reading for the dominant forces that influence a visual form (visual rhetoric), and how visual rhetoric functions persuasively.

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Introduction

“There was a police brutality and there was atrocity, and the press was just as atrocious as the police. Because they helped the police to cover it up by propagating a false image across the country.” —Malcolm X

50,000 volts of electricity by a stun gun and between 53-56 hits with two-foot solid aluminum batons to the body. Rodney King, a 25-year-old black man, was brutally beaten by four white Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers while many officers and witnesses watched it happen; it was all captured on camera. Millions watched the events unfold on television in the spring of 1991. Given the widespread media coverage and rapid circulation of this event, it can be seen as one of the first “viral” police brutality incidents in the twentieth century before the cell phone. Fast forward a year later, and the four officers were charged with assault and excessive use of force, but they were all found not guilty on all counts (Sastry & Bates, 2017). When the acquittals were announced at 3 p.m. on April 29, 1992, an upswelling of outrage enveloped the cityscape of South Central Los Angeles. Massive fires erupted across the city. Various stores and shops were destroyed and looted, followed by aggressive paramilitary policing in which officers targeted black people. However, the image broadcasted by the media of black Americans engaging in “violent” rioting is probably what most people remember about this incident. Rather than addressing criminal justice reform and justice for Rodney King, the media established the LAPD and public officials as simply keeping the peace. Ore (2019) describes the ongoing police violence

against black Americans as using “racial terror as a means of policing the boundaries between America’s white ‘us’ and its black ‘them’” (Ore, 2019).

The police brutality committed against Rodney King is important for U.S. public memory as it stands as a reminder of the routine state-sanctioned violence Black communities have endured and continue to endure (Ore, 2019). Revisiting this famous event is significant in our contemporary socio-political context given that the protests sparked by George Floyd’s death in 2020 were framed like the 1992 Los Angeles riots, with the majority of media coverage focused on looting and city damages rather than addressing the race problem in America. Although we may not live in the Jim Crow era, the media’s negative portrayals of black communities and racial protests fuels racism to be a powerful force in the collective conscience of American society (Braxton & Newton, 1992). The 1992 Los Angeles riots were framed by the *Los Angeles Times*, and other media outlets, as well as entertainment, in a way that enforced pre-existing visual rhetoric at that time, correlating blackness with a negative perception of African Americans, criminality, violence, and even un-Americanness (Dixon, 2007; Cacho, 2012; Lazzareschi 2019).

This negative representation has been seen across U.S. history; for example, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), one of the most controversial films of racial difference that can still be viewed today, depicts African-American men as uneducated, savage brutes preying on white women (Griffith & Aitken, 1915). Film is another form of media that has “‘meaning in the service of power’ that rationalize[s] systems of inequality and relations of domination” (Hughey, 2009).

The fact that white actors were in blackface illustrates how the white majority in the United States viewed African-Americans as lesser than or un-American, and similar views of racial “otherness” remain today. Such representations impact audiences through the “rhetoric of display” —rhetoric that makes ideas present through visual displays (Palczewski, 2012). Bell Hooks’s discussion of “motivated representation” of racial issues further assists in understanding how rhetorics of display work in relation to race. Hooks argues that authors of movies, books, newspaper articles, artwork, photographs, etc. are “consciously constructing the images that perpetuate white supremacy, racism, etc.” (Media Education Foundation, 2005, n.p.). These ideas of visual rhetoric influencing public perception serve as context for the interactive art exhibition I curated about the 1992 Los Angeles riots, racial protest representation, and race representation.

My approach was influenced by Kevin DeLuca’s theorization of “image events,” in which he says that the “rhetorical tactic of image events works not so much through identification as through disidentification, through the shock or laughter that shatters all the familiar landmarks of ... our thought (DeLuca, 2005, p. 52). I believe that the various media forms before and at the time of the 1992 Los Angeles riots framed the event as a violent war because of its “shock” value, and because it would identify viewers with the “order” of police rather than the “justice” for Rodney King and the black communities of South Central Los Angeles (Oh Hudson, 2017). This framing, in part, is developed by visually associating African Americans with disorder. Combining an understanding of the rhetorical influence of sensationalist image politics with an understanding of the

importance of how visual racial rhetorics function persuasively in our culture, set up the parameters for the interactive exhibition I designed as my creative package for the Honors Creative Project. This exhibition engaged with the following concepts: (1) the origin/cause of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, (2) the perception of race in racial protests coverage, and (3) the effect of this negative hegemonic visual rhetoric.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

To analyze the 1992 Los Angeles riots and prior media representation, I used multiple methodological approaches combining critical rhetorical inquiry (McKerrow, 1989) and a visual arts-based method (Butler-Kisber, 2018). Critical rhetorical scholars focus on the critique of hegemonic power and uses of rhetoric for social transformation (McKerrow, 1989; Palczewski, 2012; Schudson, 1989). A critical rhetorical approach underscores my research methods, but analyzing visual rhetoric is about asking what an artifact does as well as what it means (Palczewski, 2012). Combining rhetorical inquiry with visual arts enabled me to challenge my audiences' notions of race representation and what makes them think the way they do about race and racial protests.

As media technologies have advanced, visual forms of communication have appeared in more civic spaces than ever before. To construct an argument for my creative project, I have collected texts, films, and articles about “motivated representation” in film (Hooks, 2005); media representations of the riots and before the riots; Image Events in contemporary history (DeLuca, 2005); and how to analyze visual and material rhetorics (Palczewski, 2012). This research constructed the theoretical framework for my exhibit, in which I framed racial protests as viewed in a nullified way due to: (1) the way they have been presented historically, (2) how black communities have been identified with criminality, and (3) how film and media have used that metaphor. The findings summarized below serve as reminders that though we live in the 21st century, ideas of blackness have

remained from the inception of the United States. These ideas continue to influence how media audiences see.

Visual Rhetoric

In its most basic definition, rhetoric can be defined as communication or influence through the use of symbols (Palczewski, 2012). Rhetoric dates back to classical Greece with the study of language and its uses for persuasion. On the other hand, visual rhetoric is a relatively recent area of study that has garnered attention due to our vastly technological and visual culture. Kenneth Burke, a rhetorical theorist, advocated for the rhetorical analysis of visual images and other disciplines beyond verbal texts like “mathematics, music, sculpture, painting, dance, architectural styles, and so on” (Foss, 2005). The study of visual imagery is as important, or arguably more important, than verbal text because it is a gateway to emotions, feelings, and unconscious thoughts of the human experience, and “to restrict the study of symbol use only to verbal discourse means studying a minuscule portion of the symbols that affect individuals daily” (Butler-Kisber, 2018, p. 105; see also Foss, 2005).

According to Stuart Hall, the study of visual imagery is essential because of the implications audiences can make from a predetermined meaning proposed by an author. In a visual culture, the meaning of an image is separated from its author as audiences make their own conclusions in the process of viewing and finding personal connections. A photography professor once told me that we

choose what to include in our photographs as creatives. Unlike a traditional artist using paint to spread across the canvas, a photographer decides what to include and what is omitted (which can have ramifications as well) in their camera shot. Furthermore, Stuart Hall speaks about the forces at play when an audience member views a visual image (Palczewski, 2012, p. 74). There are three possible readings: a dominant reading, a negotiated reading, and an oppositional reading. The dominant reading is referred to as the hegemonic meaning in which viewers understand the “connoted meaning” at face value with no opposition. The negotiated reading is when some of the hegemonic meaning is understood, but there are some exceptions. Lastly, an oppositional reading is when the denotational and connotational ideologies are decoded from the viewing and are challenged with a different viewpoint.

Stuart Hall’s readings offer insight on analyzing ideological meanings present in visuals, but my thesis is also about what visual artifacts do in relation to audiences. In this case, Sonja Foss theorizes three requirements for an image to qualify as visual rhetoric, which lends itself to examining what an artifact does, and the relationships between images and audiences. “The image must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be presented to an audience for the purpose of communication with that audience” (Foss, 2005, p. 144). These ideas are evidenced in the social media feeds created for my art exhibition. Each social media post, including a fragmented text and variety of images, was symbolic (1992 Los Angeles protests), involved human intervention (strategized social media feeds with two overt perspectives of media coverage), and was presented to

an audience for the purpose of communication (exposing the media's false images of racial protests).

Visual Rhetoric in Culture (Image Events)

Regarding the visual culture at the time of the Los Angeles protests in 1992, the existing rhetorical environment featured consistent use of “motivated representation” associating blackness with criminality or un-Americanness. Considering the history of race representation in media, “the first televisual representation of African Americans were stereotypical images that validated separate and unequal worlds” (Hughey, 2009, p. 545). Caricatured images of blackness portraying black men as meek, subservient, and unintelligent were the backgrounds for black representation in media until the civil rights movement (Hughey, 2009, p. 545). Bell Hooks argues that authors consciously construct the images people view on screen, in print, and in other media (Media Education Foundation, 2005). For this reason, the social context, background, and rhetorical knowledge of the author impacts what is defined in their constructed images. Because mass media has historically been produced by individuals who hold power in society, a conclusion can therefore be made about the dominant views held by modern culture through film and media.

However, after the civil rights movement, the misrepresentation of black Americans changed from the side character, weak and idle, to “loud, tough, street smart, and with a flair for style and being ‘cool’” (Edwards, 2019, p. 15).

Violence and crime became a major theme in representations of black Americans (Worgs, 2006). As Blake Edwards describes, “Movies such as *New Jack City* (Peebles, McHenry & Jackson, 1991), *Menace II Society* (Hughes Bros. & Scott, 1993), and *Friday* (Gray & Charbonnet, 1995) frame the image of the black experience filled with strife and facing insurmountable odds as the films’ protagonists attempt to overcome these obstacles usually through questionable and amoral means” (p. 16). Though the movies *Menace II Society* and *Friday* were released after the 1992 Los Angeles protests, they nonetheless illustrate the historical context and continued perpetuation of blackness as criminal. This leads to my consideration of rhetoric used in news media coverage.

Rhetoric Media Representation and Racial Protests

Prior to completing my thesis, I had noticed that, when it comes to deaths involving unarmed black Americans and law enforcement, media coverage frequently fixates on peripheral information that often triggers negative misconceptions of the victims of police violence. For example, in the news coverage of George Floyd, who was wrongfully murdered by Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, Donald Trump retweeted a video of conservative activist Candace Owens’ interview with Glenn Beck, in which they criticized George Floyd’s character and his “very long record and very long criminal record” (Porter, 2020) My question then, as I have now, is why is this information necessary to understand why George Floyd died? Such portrayals spread negative

misconceptions of black Americans and redirect the conversation away from the need to reform police encounters with and attitudes about the black community, which are impacted by media representation (Smiley and Fakunle, 2016).

The dominant political rhetoric used to describe the 1992 Los Angeles protests can be derived from President George Bush's presidential address covering the events as "the brutality of a mob, pure and simple." Rather than portraying the protests as calling attention to the imbalanced socio-political atmosphere of South Central Los Angeles and the miscarriage of justice for Rodney King, the protests were instead narrowly covered as "riots." This language comes with negative implications like "looting" and criminal behavior compared to the use of "protests," "uprisings," or "rebellion." This framing of the 1992 Los Angeles protests speaks to the idea of "Image Events," which aim to dis-identify rather than identify through the shock that shatters thoughts (DeLuca, 2005, p. 52). Understanding both protests as well as media coverage of protests as "Image Events" recognizes "power as not monumental but fluid, power not as unitary, centralized, and institutionalized, but also diffuse, capillary and everywhere" (DeLuca, 2005, p. 60). The mainstream media depiction of the Los Angeles protests as riots and as a "black thing" (Hunt, 2012) illustrates how the 1992 Los Angeles protests were used as an "image event" to further falsify ideas of black criminality and racial protests.

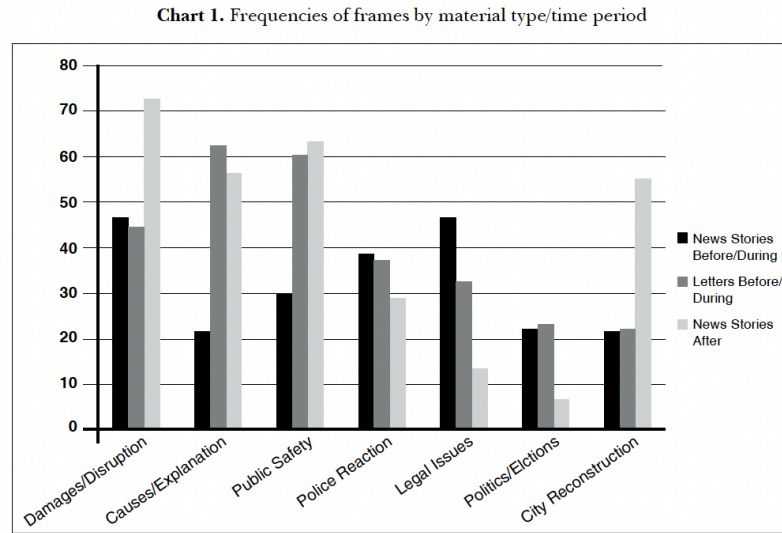


Figure 1 - Bar Graph of News Stories Frequency Frames

Oh, S. K., & Hudson, J. (2017). Framing and reframing the 1992 LA Riots: A study of minority issues framing by the Los Angeles Times and its readers. *Revista de Comunicación*, 16(2), 123–146. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.26441/RC16.2-2017-A6>

Soo-Kwang Oh and Justin Hudson’s study of the *LA Times* coverage during the 1992 Los Angeles protests, which examined changing frequencies of news frames, found that news stories before and during the protests were mainly focused on legal issues, damages/disruption, and police reaction. According to the bar graph, news stories after the protests mainly focused on damages/disruption, public safety, and city reconstruction. By focusing on property and destruction instead of on the economic and social disparities faced by the black community and minorities, the discussion about the protests became more critical than supportive. One headline read, “When Violence is Wrong: Social Injustice Is One Thing, Crime is Another” (Los Angeles Times, 20 May 1992). A rhetorical focus

on criminality and damages/disruption caused by protests provides a negative narrative of black Americans, minorities, and racial protests, which ultimately does not contribute to critical conversations about racism and race representation.

Arts-Based Critique

Though the medium for my creative project was not collage in the traditional sense, I looked to the chapter, “Collage Inquiry,” from the book, *Qualitative Inquiry*, by Lynn Butler-Kisber, as inspiration for my visual arts-based method. My exhibition is a collage of visual/audio/textual elements. My art exhibition consisted of George Holliday’s physical video of Rodney King being assaulted by the four officers in 1991, a written second by second account of the actions in the video, a large infographic contextualization banner explaining the conditions leading up to the protests in Los Angeles 1992, two created social media feeds containing contrasting perspectives of the events, and a reflective mural. This collage method enabled me to “visually synthesize” my rhetorical analysis of the 1992 Los Angeles riots “as a way of examining identity and values” in regard to race and racial protest representation (Butler-Kisber, 2018).

As Butler-Kisber explains, collage works as reflection, elicitation, and conceptualization. Instead of working deductively from ideas to feelings like critical rhetorical scholars analyzing texts, arts-based critique allowed me to work inductively from feelings to ideas (Butler-Kisber, 2018). News media forms messages that are supposed to spark feelings, which have ancestors to thoughts

and ideas (Dr. Windrow, Honors Lecture Series: Civic Virtue, Fall 2020). By using art to examine rhetoric about race and racial protests, I was able to get a concrete response about my work from my viewers and express my analysis in a tangible way. As a result of viewing, I desired for my audience to reflect on their views of race and racial protests, to elicit words to explain their human experience in the context of their surroundings and those around them, and to bring unarticulated ideas to the surface.

Exhibition Process and Production

Although I entered into the design process for my exhibition with a certain set of ideas, critical rhetorical and qualitative arts-based critique allow for an iterative research process, in which emergent understandings are developed through deeper exploration of a text, image, event, or other cultural phenomenon. What started out in my thesis proposal as an idea to produce a gallery full of printed satirical advertisements instead became a more immersive, interactive, and relevant experience. From the advice of my second reader, Professor Tony Rodriguez, I decided to change my creative package from a printed forum to a digital platform, Instagram. This decision came from the fact that many of my peers consume their news on social media platforms. According to Statista, most Instagram users come from the 18-34-year-old age bracket as of October 2021 (Statista Research Department, 2022), which is why I chose Instagram as the platform for my differing perspectives of the 1992 Los Angeles protests. Below, I provide further details and images of the constructed social media feeds. This is followed by description and images of the other components of the exhibition: Contextualization Banner, Reflective Mural, George Holliday's video, clay rubble, and other audio aids.

Elements – Social Media Feeds

I created my social media feeds to construct two different rhetorical arguments in relation to how the 1992 Los Angeles protests were covered. Per the

advice of my thesis advisor, Dr. Roberta Chevrette, I created two overtly differing perspectives to emphasize how media framings impact racial representations. I named these feeds the Black Survivor News and the White Savior News. Using the language “survivor” and “savior,” I was able to curate conspicuous contrasting stories of the same events during the protests.

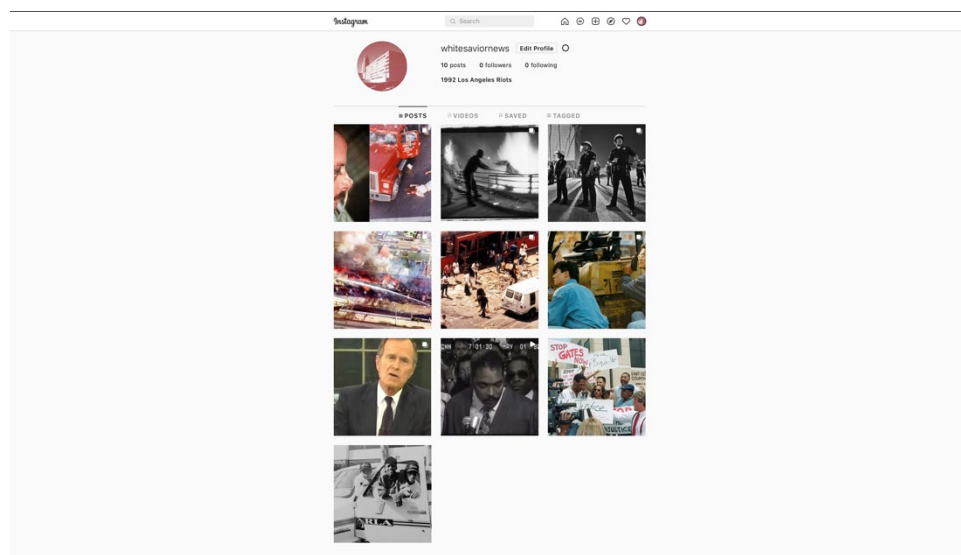


Figure 2 - Screenshot of White Savior News Social Media Feeds

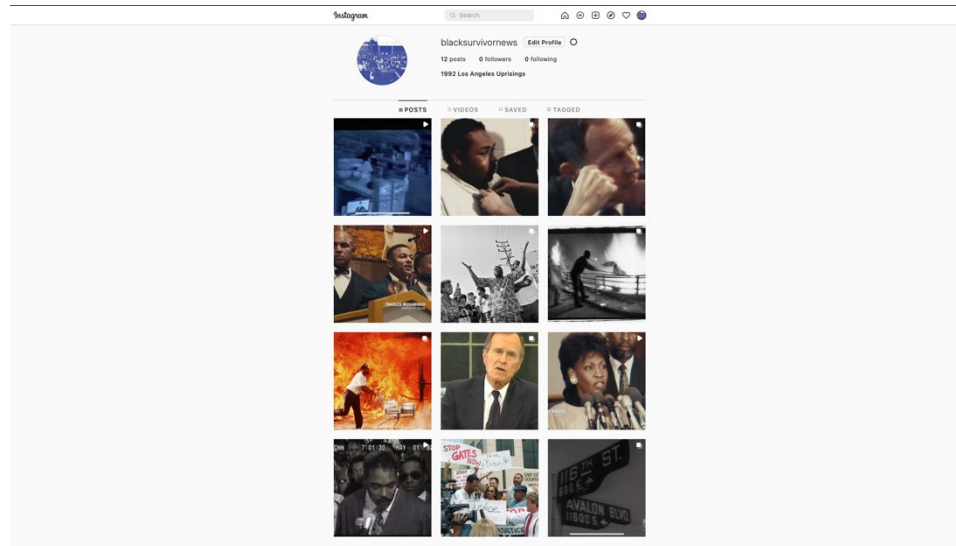


Figure 3 - Screenshot of Black Survivor News Social Media Feed

I constructed different media frames in two ways. First, I used different language in the captions accompanying the same images in the two different social media feeds. For example, both social media feeds featured George H.W. Bush’s presidential address and the picture of a masked protestor burning the American flag. In the White Savior News, similar to the coverage at the time of the protests, I used language such as “riots,” “looting,” and “criminal.” In the Black Survivor News, I contrasted this with a more systems-based critical approach focused on the black American experience as “surviving,” and “protestors.” Additionally, I included certain images in one social media feed that were not present in the other, illustrating the bias in what is included in news media coverage and what is left out.

To decide what to include in each created social media feed, I referred to the *LA 92* documentary directed by T. J. Martin and Daniel Lindsay and various news articles from newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times*. From there, I generated a timeline of the major events that occurred during the protests with photographs that I retrieved from various journalist photographers (Ted Soqui), creative commons public domain, and articles with the same timestamp. From there, I produced timelines for each social media feed: Black Survivor News and White Savior News. Below is the researched timeline along with a designated letter that defines which social media feed the event was included in (if any); the letter “B” corresponds with the Black Survivor News, and the letter “W” corresponds with the White Savior News.

Timeline (Occurred over 6 days from 04/29/1992 - 05/05/1992)

- March 3, 1991 - George Holliday’s video tape of Rodney King’s attack
- Men’s Central Jail Interview with Rodney King after incident “B”
- Los Angeles City Hall Meeting discussing the incident “B”
- March 16, 1991 - Soon Ja Du shot Latasha Harlins “B”
- April 29, 1992 - Verdict decided
- U.S. Congresswoman, Maxine Waters speaks on the case after the verdict came out “B”
- First AME Church peaceful protests begin “B”

- Charles Muhammad makes his speech on the matter at the First AME Church “B”
- Corner of Florence & Normandie peaceful protests begin “B” and “W”
- Corner of Florence & Normandie - protests become more aggressive with hitting cars, throwing rocks/bottles, and fires spread across Los Angeles “B” and “W”
- Reginald Benny is taken from his truck and beaten around 7:39 pm 4/29/1992 “W”
- Governor Pete Wilson calls for an official state of emergency
- U.S. Congresswoman, Maxine Waters states that the Congressional Black Caucus has no communication with the White House or president “B”
- At Steven Leverman’s law offices, Rodney King pleads to protestors to stop the looting, damages, and violence “B” and “W”
- George H.W. Bush addresses the nation on the matter “B” and “W”
- 05/05/1992 - Outside East County Courthouse, peaceful protests incite the end of the 6-day protests in Los Angeles “B” and “W”
- Ending remarks “B” and “W”

The media frames I constructed on the White Savior News Instagram page displayed the Los Angeles protests as “riots.” This aligns with how the protests were covered by dominant media at the time; like the newspaper stories analyzed by Oh and Hudson, the majority of social media posts I constructed for this page focused on the damages and violence of the protests. On the other hand,

the Black Survivor News displayed the Los Angeles protests as an “uprising,” which constructs a more positive framing of the black community rising above the miscarriage of justice and protesting the verdict. This social media feed focused more on how the protests developed from peaceful to a more aggressive approach and the conditions that led to the demonstrations becoming more combative. When the trial was moved to Simi Valley, a predominantly white community (88%) in which most LAPD officers resided, there was no question whether “community-based policing” would favor the LAPD officers (Hunt, 2012). The black community and supporters following the case were angry at the outcomes of the trial, and this social media feed displayed the protestors’ side and what they endured.



Figure 4 - Social Media Feeds in Gallery Space

Elements – Contextualization Banner

Found in the collage method is “creative practice, juxtaposition, interdisciplinary, a link to daily life, a situated artist/researcher, cultural critique and transformation, open-endedness, multiple, provisional, and interdependent products” (Butler-Kisber, 2018, p. 117). These are the qualities I discovered while digitally painting the reflective mural and designing the contextualization banner for this exhibition. I wanted to make my exhibit an interactive space of rhetorical analysis that offered chronological information on the protests as a whole. By combining my graphic design skills with critical rhetorical inquiry, I created an

interdisciplinary experience of visuals and written content that could be consumed by a general audience.



Figure 5 - 2 Printed Banner Files

For my contextualization banner, I narrowed down the main conditions leading up to the 1992 Los Angeles protests: education, economy, workforce, CBO defunding, prison, and Latasha Harlin's case (Johnson, 1992). Within each section, I created infographics using the following Graphic Design skills: hierarchy, color, image-making, texture, blocked composition, and typography. By focusing on the two decades leading up to the protests, I included specific information rather than making generalizations in each section. The Contextualization Banner thus served as a timeline describing the various sectors affecting the daily life of South Central Los Angeles citizens and the black community, with the purpose of prefacing the protest within a larger social context.



Figure 6 - Contextualization Banner in Gallery Space

Elements – Reflective Mural

What did I want to say as a scholar and graphic artist about how media’s false images of protests impact race representation and contribute to historical and ongoing racial inequalities? That was the question I tried to answer throughout this multi-methodological process. After designing the contextualization banner and the social media feeds, what did I want my audience to further think, discuss, and write about? I thought about various visuals with negative connotations facing the black community. I thought about how the “color coding” in our culture “operate[s] as a background factor in the development and/or maintenance

of attitudes toward racial groups” (Longshore, 1979, p. 184), with black defined as “bad” and white as “good.” As I contemplated the history of slavery, “motivated representations” in film and other media (Hooks, 2005), and news coverage on police brutality committed against black people, I thought back to the concluding social media post I made for the Black Survivor News. I included the interview with Bill Stout, who reported on the 1965 Watts Rebellion in this post. I thought about how similar the events in 1965 were to the 1992 Los Angeles protests as well as to the various protests in 2020. Though there have been strides in improving representation and exposing racism in the United States in contemporary times, I feel that nothing has truly changed in the “us” versus “them” ideology that has been present since slavery. I designed the reflective mural to encompass my feelings of these issues from a contemporary perspective.

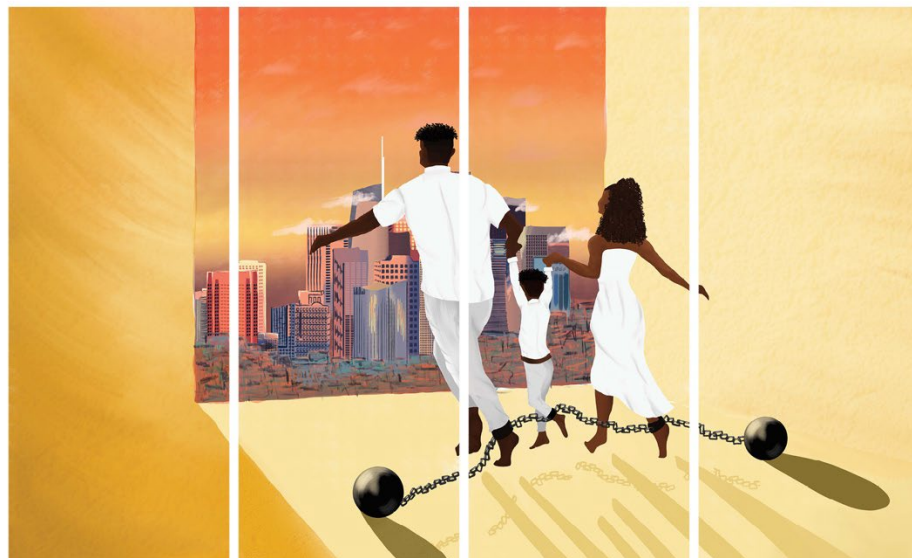


Figure 7 - Reflective Mural

In my mural, I depicted a black family, wearing all white, running to the city of Los Angeles. However, their location remains planted as their feet are shackled together in the sand. Titled “Shackled Promises,” I wanted to challenge the idea that racism has been eradicated and reflect my feelings of disbelief. We can inform and educate, but hate and evil are a defect of humankind that I believe will remain in culture till the end of humanity. And yet, I am hopeful. As audiences viewed my mural, I hoped they could see it as a metaphor addressing this disheartenment with modern culture, and think critically about how race is represented. For example, the black family in my mural are weighed down by shackles as they walk towards a life in the city of Los Angeles, and this was how I wanted to synthesize this juxtaposition between disheartenment and hopefulness in historical and contemporary media representations.



Figure 8 - Dedicated Mural in Gallery Space

Elements – Background Materials

Additional elements included in my art exhibition were various audio excerpts from Stuart Hall and Bell Hooks about representation and the media, clay rubble in the corners of the art exhibition, and George Holliday's video displayed at the beginning of the gallery space. By engaging additional senses, these background elements contributed to the overall interactive experience.



Figure 9 - Corner with Clay Rubble



Figure 10 - Clay Rubble with Contextualization Banner Perspective



Figure 11 - Clay Rubble with George Holliday's Video and Entry-way

[Cannon_AudioforSpace.mov](#)

Figure 12 - Link to Audio for Gallery Space

[Cannon_VideoforSpace.mp4](#)

Figure 13 - Link to George Holliday's Video for Gallery Space

Impact

I believe my art thesis exhibition successfully demonstrated my argument about media coverage and its impact on race representation and racial protests. Presenting on WGNS radio and analyzing the written responses from the exhibition further allowed me to explore the impact of my arts-based critique on audiences.

Radio Show with WGNS and Scholars Week

As a result of my relevant thesis topic, I was invited to the radio show, WGNS, to discuss the production process of the exhibition and promote my exhibition. Scott Walker asked questions that contended with my exploration of race and rhetoric, how I chose my thesis topic, and the inquiries I made about media coverage in 1992 during the protests. Additionally, we discussed the similarities between the 1992 Los Angeles protests and the protests around the country in 2020 because of George Floyd's murder by police officers. This was a very enriching experience, speaking about how my thesis topic is relevant in contemporary times. As a result of campus conversation about my exhibit, I also received a direct invitation to MTSU Scholars Week, leading to part of my exhibition being displayed in the Student Union on March 25, 2022. These opportunities have enabled me to further conversation relating to media, race representation, and protests.

<https://www.wgnsradio.com/article/73379/mtsu-and-wgns-explore-a-number-of-topics-to-include-the-aerospace-department-and-a-move-to-shelbyville-womens-history-and-medias-false-images-of-racial-protests-exhibition>

Figure 14 - Link to WGNS Radio Interview

Discussion of Feedback

At the conclusion of my art thesis exhibition, I received positive and validating feedback. On either side of my dedicated mural, I had a question for the audience to respond to with sticky notes. I received a total of 30 responses.

My first question was: “After viewing this exhibition, how have the images/videos/social media feeds left you feeling or thinking?” Responses fell into a couple of categories: social media feed usage, and feelings based on the exhibition, police, and the us vs. them argument. One response that stood out in the social media feed usage category was: “The addition of social media to a decades-old topic introduces an interesting dialogue to information and mis info. What is represented and what is not represented is just as relevant as it was 30 years old.”

This is something that I did not consider initially because, at first, I was going to design satirical advertisements. However, this response is the reason I decided to go with social media feeds because my second reader, Professor Rodriguez, had the same thought process. Since we primarily consume news

through social media, the duality between seeing a past event in a contemporary setting like Instagram would correlate to how this topic of police brutality and the Media's False Images of Racial Protests continue to occur.

Based on the experience, most people left the exhibition with feelings of surprise, unsettlement, frustration, and skepticism, which are valid feelings I hoped would come out of my exhibition. These are the same feelings I contended with throughout this guided exploration of a thesis topic. Skepticism with police officers and the desire for reform in police departments and detainment policies. Frustration with social media and its influence on racial protests, race representation, and racism. One theme that stood out from the responses was the connection viewers made to the "us versus them" argument. Three respondents discussed the "us versus them" argument and saw the contrasting social media feeds as such; it "illustrates violence vs. peace" one respondent said.

On the other side of my mural, I had the question: "How has viewing this exhibition about the biases of race and racial protests in media impacted your understanding of representation, race, and racial protests?" The responses fell into two categories: social media influence and black representation. Eight out of twelve responses contended with social media influence and how these "media bubbles" affect how events and race are perceived. Respondents spoke about how my exhibition "highlighted the impact of bias" and how "video/photos ... can be manipulated, edited, or hidden to push the narrative of violent protests. It also shows how the context behind protests is purposefully observed," another respondent said. The remaining respondents spoke about how "we must look"

when another group of people is oppressed in terms of black representation. “We should never be silent when a group of people is oppressed because that is when we become a part of the problem,” said one respondent. A notable response for me was: “the lack of black representation in newsrooms is just another pillar of white supremacy that distorts realities in our country in favor of those in power.” This was a response I didn’t expect, but I believe it is a valid point. Overall, I was very pleased with the feedback I received from my art thesis exhibition.

Conclusion

I believe an arts-based critique offers important insights and implications compared to traditional rhetorical praxis. Utilizing the collage-based approach enabled me to make connections between visual culture and texts, and allowed audiences to experience my argument in a way they would not have otherwise been able to. Utilizing multi-media fragments of information in an interactive manner, I was able to visually synthesize and provoke reflection on media's false images of protest. With my exhibition, I challenged my audiences' notions of race representation and what makes them think the way they do about race and racial protests. In 1992, social media did not yet exist, so repositioning the Rodney King riots to be experienced by audiences in this manner, allowed audiences to make a contemporary and embodied connection with historical events that may have seemed more distant. By framing the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings in two different perspectives, I opened a conversation about how coverage influences the way we perceive events, as it did recently with George Floyd's death in 2020.

The method of arts-based critique, despite the insights it enabled, also produced challenges. First, visual rhetoric is still a relatively new area of study, and although knowledge of visual rhetorical methods is expanding, there are not well-established procedures for measuring audience attitudes and engagement with rhetorical texts in this manner, nor are there criteria for instituting concrete change. I do not have any way of knowing whether my audience's views were altered as a result of viewing my exhibition unless I had a more defined target audience and monitored post-experience. Second, the literature on collage and

arts-based critique is limited “given the historical trajectory of arts-informed research, [which] most often resonate[s] with textual forms of arts-informed inquiry rather than visual ones” (Butler-Kisber, 2018, p. 119). In other words, recording arts-based research in the form of writing, falls short in fully capturing a visual experience. In the face of these challenges, my project required blending visual analysis with rhetorical critique. My images alone: the contextualization banner, the social media feeds without the captions, and the reflective mural, wouldn’t make as much of an impact without the accompanying critique that came from researching the rhetoric used in media coverage during the 1992 Los Angeles protests. Like Butler-Kisber advocates, there needs to be more artists to forge arts-based inquiry to make a more fruitful conversation about contemporary cultural issues.

One additional challenge relates to the shareability of the critique and the manipulation of social media content for artistic purposes. Since this art exhibition was created in the educational realm, there were more artist protections regarding content creation. However, copyright laws and, in my case, the Instagram Community Guidelines gave rise to ethical issues outside of the educational context. While creating my “private” social media posts, I was flagged multiple times for either photography/videos or vocabulary. This led to some information/imagery being omitted from the final production of my social media feeds.

The goal of my thesis art exhibition was to analyze the importance of reading for the dominant forces that influence a visual form and how visual

rhetoric functions persuasively in the racial protests of 1992 Los Angeles as well as to provoke feelings through visual forms. Personally, it was a fulfilling experience of shock, pain, intensity, sadness, successes, failures, and most importantly, advocating a perspective that is not necessarily mainstream with my craft. As my first exhibition, the process allowed me to grow as an artist and contemplate the conscious messages I create. As designers, I think we often forget the power we have and that we must be socially responsible. Designing with a rhetorical vision of inclusivity and representation are qualities I want to carry on in my graphic design and marketing career.

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