

EXCHANGE



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The Semiotics of "Straight Thuggin"

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This paper will use semiotic principles to explain how and why a dormitory theme party held recently at the University of Chicago entertained a group of white students even as it offended their African American colleagues. In what follows I will show that it achieved this effect, primarily for two reasons: first, many of the properties or characteristics of "thuggin" that the former group objectified as a source of revelry were also conventional indices of dress and behavior associated with the latter group. Beyond that, although they did not attend the party, black students - by virtue of their race - came to index thuggin' even more successfully than party-goers. In other words, this essay will demonstrate how racial affiliations are partially produced through visual cues, and how these cues are used to differentiate between white and black students at the U of C. In addition, I will demonstrate how the party-goers employed semiotic technologies to thug at one moment, but later repositioned themselves outside of that identity, appropriating the "voice" of popular culture - a 'voice from nowhere' - to defend their actions.

The Event: White Students (Re) Produce "Thug" Life

On October 14, 2005 a group of 20 or so white undergraduates at the University of Chicago held what they referred to as a "Straight Thuggin" party. This party was the second in a series of theme parties held at the Max Palevsky residential commons. The first party celebrated the '80s and the third, which was never held, would have focused on the '90s. However, before we can examine the semiotics of the "Straight Thuggin" party in particular, it is critical that we explore the genre of Theme Parties in general.

According to Bakhtin, a "genre" is a ritual form, recognizable by recurrent properties (Bakhtin 1981). But what are the recurrent properties of a Theme Party? First, what differentiates a Theme Party from a regular party is that the former is characterized by the understanding that it represents a particular idea or subject; it treats the theme of the party, in other words, as an indexical icon. The theme is an indexical icon because it invokes a unifying quality or idea around which the party is grounded. In this context, "thuggin" was the object that the participants indexed - or referred to - by means of inhabiting roles appropriate for this party.

But what does the role of a "thug" entail? How does one perform such a role? Students at this party did so by wearing baseball caps sideways, gold chains, and "pants so low that their underwear showed." One student even wore handcuffs and toted a bottle wrapped up in a brown paper bag. In addition to indexing the "thug" lifestyle through their attire, students drank

beer and listened to rap music. What is significant here is that these actions - listening to rap - and emblems -gold chains, baggy pants - indexically invoke the predisposed normativities that they have come to associate with the lifestyle of a thug. Thus, these emblems are, more specifically, conventional icons that refer the attendees to the characteristics that a "thug" is presumed to embody in the popular imagination, consequentially enabling them to perform this role.

But, what exactly is a "thug"? From the perspective of semiotician Charles Peirce, a "thug" is a type of sign, believed to point to particular qualities. The emblems, moreover, which index this sign - gold chains, baggy pants - serve to represent "thuggin'" based on one's presumption that there is someone called a thug who embodies these qualities or characteristics. In other words, what allows people to adopt the role of a "thug" is the idea that a thug has certain qualities and that s/he can be represented in terms of them. However, from a semiotic perspective, if the concept of "thug" is only rendered visible by certain emblems that, when assembled together in a particular fashion, invoke certain qualities or characteristics, what makes a "Straight Thuggin'" party any different from a theme party that brings together a group of people displaying signs that index a particular decade, such as the '80s or '90s?

This brings us to a critical juncture of this essay - one in which we find the reason why the indexical icons that refer to "thuggin'" offended one particular group of students. The "Straight Thuggin'" party was offensive because many of the behavioral practices and characteristics of "thuggin'" that one group indexed and objectified in jest, were also the conventional indices of dress and behavior for another group of students, namely African Americans at the University of Chicago. This point becomes clear if we examine more closely the message of the party, and the stances of both groups in relation to it.

The "Compliment": What Does Race Have to do With "Thuggin'?"

Upon hearing about the party a small group of black students decided to investigate exactly what was going on. Although the party was over by the time they arrived, they crossed the path of a party-goer who, intending to compliment them, said that had they attended the party, they "would have been the most thuggin' people there." Note, that although the black students attempted to satisfy their curiosity about the party, they were not dressed for it; the clothes they wore represented their conventional style of dress. Yet, even though they were not adorned with any emblems or indexical icons of "thuggin'," although their wrists were free of handcuffs, and their palms absent of alcohol, according to this attendee, they were able to invoke a "thug" lifestyle with more success than any of the people who attended the party. But, how can this be? Perhaps we can unravel this paradox if we examine this "compliment" more closely.

Although the attendee who uttered the statement said later that he meant by his comment to say that the black students were dressed appropriately for the gathering, in the least, we can say that these students did not have as many emblems that referred to the theme of the party; and, the ones they did have were not worn with the understanding that they were indexical. Hence, we see that this attendee, in addition to giving them a "compliment," was also making an argument based on his observation of them. In terms of Peircian semiotics an "argument" is a sign whose referents are symbolic. Thus, this attendee is arguing that the referents - i.e. the conventional dress of black students - are more symbolic of "thuggin'" than any of the referents - such as handcuffs, beer in brown paper bags, underwear-exposed outfits - whites students invoked at the party. He is

stating, in other words, that although he and his fellow colleagues tried with great effort to conjure the iconicity of a "thug," the black students did so effortlessly and more authentically.

We find by this example blackness itself, is a kind of sign in this context. One that can represent a class of qualities, such as those associated with "thuggin'," and invoke these qualities by virtue of its presence.

The Aftermath: The Song and Dance of Naivety and Victimization

As the news of the party spread in the following days, several students expressed their displeasure. In response, one attendee stated, "Most of us were ignorant about how our comments or actions might be taken." He further suggested the university do a better job of teaching new students about racial tensions on campus. Another student who attended the party claimed, "We are being used as guinea pigsÉ to make a statement about the racial dynamics on campus." Notice here how the attendees change their stance - or "footing" - in relation to the message of the party. The same students who once inhabited the subversive role of thugs are now realigning themselves in relation to the proprieties of "thuggin'" which they had previously invoked. Now one student inhabits the role of a naïve freshman who is "ignorant" about issues of race, and the other is a victim - or guinea pig - used as a scapegoat for the University administration.

Furthermore, the attendees stress that even if they may have inadvertently offended African American students, they did not invent the stereotypical roles that they inhabited, they simply acted them out. In other words, they were not the authors of the message, they simply animated it. In this regard, one attendee stated, "In our opinion, be they ignorant or notÉ it was more mocking MTV culture and dressing up in baggy clothes and listening to rap or hip hop music." This statement illustrates the attendees' claim that they were gesturing out and grasping hold of cultural information - or schemata - appropriated from popular culture, schemata that existed prior to their party. They were simply in dialogue with MTV. Stated differently, they are arguing that they did not write the script of their performance, they were just "voicing" or "animating" the messages of popular culture. This is a voice that, ideologically speaking, 'comes from nowhere;' one that is believed to be equally representative of and available to all social groups.

In fact, although the administration has now stipulated that such indexical-iconic manifestations - parties that may be offensive to a particular group - are forbidden through a verbal metalanguage - the code of conduct - the attendees were able to manipulate their song - "voicing" - and dance - "footing" - routine to such an extent as to avoid disciplinary sanction. We witness here the successful self-defense in a student role wherein the party-goers admit ignorance on their behalf, but assert that they can be educated (rather than expelled that is).

Conclusion

Exploring the semiotics of "thuggin'" evidences how, by unpacking the norms of indexicality to which it pertains, a typical social situation - a college party - can become politically charged. We learn from this example that examining the form a message does not necessarily convey its meaning. In the context of the "Straight Thuggin'" party, it is not simply the fact that some students were dressed in baggy pants, but the ideas about black culture indexed by such emblems which offends. We see, then, that our ritual activities can give us insight into the realms of social life if - as we do on some level in any conversation- we explore the conventional indices entailed within a particular kind of message. Doing so may allow us to understand

how "thug" life, for instance, can amuse some people at the same time that it insults others.

Works Cited

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