

AMY STEIN

Photography

SATURDAY, MAY 16, 2009

The Illusion of Sex and Attractiveness



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The winners of the 5th annual [Best Visual Illusion of the Year Contest](#) have just been announced and the results are all together trippy. However, the third place illusion by Richard Russell of Harvard really stuck with me.

In the Illusion of Sex, two faces are perceived as male and female. However, both faces are actually versions of the same androgynous face. One face was created by increasing the contrast of the androgynous face, while the other face was created by decreasing the contrast. The face with more contrast is perceived as female, while the face with less contrast is perceived as male.

The Illusion of Sex demonstrates that contrast is an important cue for perceiving the sex of a face, with greater contrast appearing feminine, and lesser contrast appearing masculine.

Richard's work on the perception of faces and the artificial enhancement of gender using contrast is really interesting. His research finds that while contrast is an important cue for how we determine sex, enhancement of that contrast has the opposite effect on the *perceived* attractiveness of men and women. Lowering the contrast makes men less attractive and raising it makes women more attractive. This bias is exploited—and reinforced—by the cosmetic industry, photo-editors and marketers in the overly-retouched photographs found in

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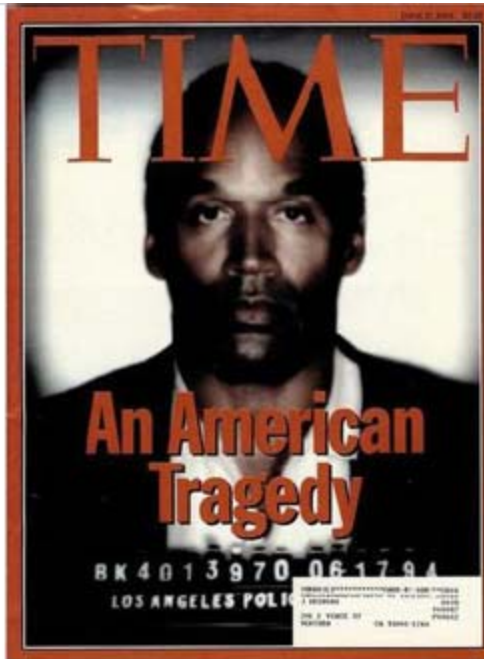
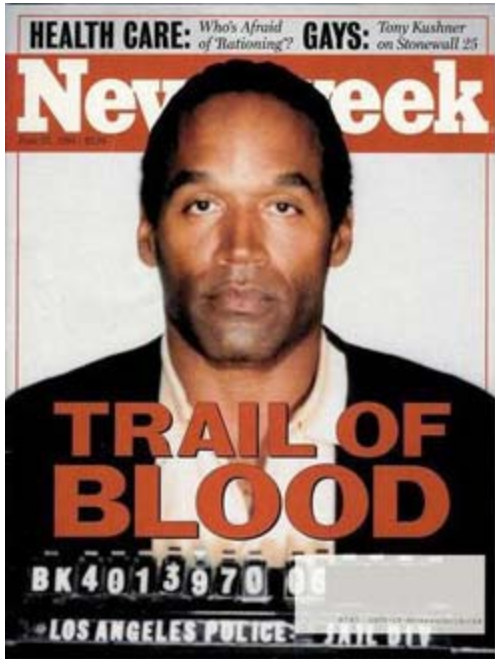
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Labels: [Beauty](#), [Beyonce](#), [Gender](#), [Illusion](#), [OJ Simpson](#)

POSTED BY AMY STEIN AT 12:02 PM

8 COMMENTS :

 Tim said...

this is so interesting. i think you can also say they are making OJ "blacker" to make him more evil, and Beyonce "whiter" to make her more beautiful.

6:11 PM

 Amy Stein said...

Beauty is a social construct and, sadly, examples like these perpetuate and reinforce the outdated visual mnemonics of race.

7:27 PM

 caleb condit said...

I thought the opposite on the first two faces. The more contrasty seems to have sharper edged features (chiseled) and the softer (aka feminine) features...

2:43 PM

 Billy Hunt said...

Raising the contrast helps with attractiveness for both men and women? Even though it decreases the masculinity of the men? Interesting. I can't help but think about race when thinking about this article and your examples. The tradition of darkening and lightening people of color, depending on your message. OJ is looking pretty contrasty.

10:23 AM

 Amy Stein said...

Billy -- That's not what the research says. Differences in contrast give cues to gender. From there, increasing contrast for women increases their perceived attractiveness and decreasing contrast for men decreases their perceived attractiveness. I don't think it works the other way like you suggest.

This definitely makes you think about race. That's why I said, "beauty is a social construct and, sadly, examples like these (OJ and Beyonce) perpetuate and reinforce the outdated

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visual mnemonics of race."

10:34 AM

 Billy Hunt said...

I knew I was missing something. Thanks.

Hey, are you speaking at the Festival of the Photograph?

10:51 AM

 Walter Dufresne said...

This post has been removed by the author.

10:44 AM

 Walter Dufresne said...

Thanks for linking to this. In all the proffered examples, I'm mostly noticing changes in density (opacity/brightness) rather than changes in the closely-related tone reproduction characteristic called contrast. And in the first example, the stunning optical characteristic is -- for me anyway -- the softened pixel edges. Thanks for this fascinating link.

11:23 AM

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