

CD's: *Seeing Deeper*
Into the Artist Through
Visual Rhetoric



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The Beatles. N*Sync. Michael Jackson. We have all acquired our own unique musical preferences and tastes throughout our lifetime, but how have we developed these predilections? No doubt our personal listening experiences have shaped our views, but the images artists project of themselves are an integral part of how we have come to perceive them, ultimately defining our appreciation of these cultural icons. One way in which artists portray themselves and their music is through their album covers, which aim to sell their image to the consumer and represent the content of the record. CD covers may be more artistic than advertisements, but essentially they are the same as the labeling on any other product—they try to convince individuals to purchase the music by presenting a clear, unified appeal to potential consumers. The specific visual rhetorical appeals that the artist and producers choose are insignificant so long as they all contribute toward building one vivid, persuasive image. For the two female vocalists Lauryn Hill and Mariah Carey, the combinations of similar rhetorical strategies resulted in completely different images, not in terms of the actual visual representation, but rather their clarity of message. Carefully crafted visual rhetoric associates Lauryn Hill with rich, personal meaning and artistic complexity, while contradictions in Mariah Carey's appeals juxtapose physical beauty and blatant sexuality with the respect afforded to cultural idols. Of the two, only Lauryn Hill emerges successful in that she sells a very strong, cohesive image with which the consumer can identify. This comparison suggests that artists should strive to be very careful and articulate

with the visual language of their cover, for the subtle power of visual rhetoric depends on the synergy of the individual appeals.

At first glance, the eye finds the cover of Lauryn Hill's first solo album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998), to be an intriguing introduction to this unique artist. Crudely carved on a wooden surface we see a portrait of a young woman we assume to be the artist, with the title etched above her. We sense that the album is very personal and, after further reflection, we discover that the presentation of this image creates meaning on multiple levels and that its quiet complexity conveys a story. Overall, all of the visual rhetorical appeals give us a clear conception that the record will emphasize content, and we can expect honest lyrics sharing the story of the defining learning experiences in her life.



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The first and most obvious aspects of the album cover that we notice are the easily observable facts, which by *logos* persuade the viewer to draw reasonable conclusions. For

example, we see that the wood on which her face is carved is actually a desktop, as the pencil at the top of the image indicates. Now, on a superficial level anyway, we have a connection between “miseducation” and the images we see. We can then infer that the drawing and lettering depicted are carved by someone in school, and from experience we know that usually those children who aren’t actively engaged in learning or are troubled are the ones who scratch this sort of graffiti into their desks. The whole title is now beginning to make sense—Lauryn Hill wasn’t properly educated, and as a result, missed out on much of what other children were exposed to and what they learned. The rhetoric of the CD cover then persuades the viewer that the music contained therein speaks to her difficulties in life as the result of her ignorance (or misinformation) regarding certain important issues. We now have the “facts of the story” and a framework within which we can analyze other aspects of the cover.

While on the surface it appears that “miseducation” refers to school alone (the pencil, desktop, etc.), subtle clues and common sense tells us that her miseducation is about life values and that her conceptions about love, respect, devotion, faith, etc. were formed from corrupted sources. Here is where the persuasion of *pathos* enters into the picture. When we examine her picture, we note that she appears reflective, a bit sad, and perhaps even (based on her upward gaze) hopeful. This Lauryn looks older, more serious, and contemplative than a person we would normally associate with such symbols of elementary school, as if she has been through much in her lifetime. Her portrait is clearly designed to gain our sympathy and it succeeds in allowing those who have also experience difficulties in their life to instantly relate to her. Also, the fact that just her face, framed by her dark hair, rather than her whole body, is shown reinforces the idea that this album is about her thoughts, her soul, her mind, and her personal development, and the thought of exposure to such sincere emotion is inviting to any person. It is also possible that *pathos* works on a subconscious level as well. Implicit stereotypes inevitably

exist in the minds of many, and therefore we must address the possibility of her ethnicity making it easier for the viewer to imagine her having added difficulties in her life. Overall, we see how the *pathos* evoked by her portrait builds upon the relationship to poor education established through *logos* by expanding her miseducation to issues on a much larger, life-altering scale.

Beyond the expression on Lauryn's face, other more subtle artistic details in the CD cover also indirectly make appeals through *pathos*, furthering the connection the viewer feels to the artist. It is a very textural image in general, and the crude, coarse, rugged, and almost violent quality of the carving implies that it was a forced, difficult process and one that took a great deal of time. This portrayal implies a parallel to Lauryn's personal development and the challenges she had to overcome, evoking our sympathy with her "rough" past. Also, the colors are very earth-toned and natural, and they seem to imply that Lauryn will speak honestly and with a raw sincerity in her songs, a quality that is always much appreciated in a world of increasingly manufactured music. The shading of the colors is significant as well, for the top of the page is noticeably lighter, with her forehead being the lightest point, indicating some sort of enlightenment or renewal, which many of us experience at one point or another in our lives. All of these details work together to produce an image of Lauryn that conveys not only the difficulties she has faced, but also the strength she applied to transcend her past, earning her our empathy and respect.

While many highly effective visual rhetoric strategies align to persuade the consumer of the honest, personal, and emotional expression of Lauryn Hill's music, many of the same strategies fail to produce an equally powerful image for Mariah Carey's *#1's* album (1998), a compilation of all of her chart-topping tracks. Mariah, attempting to capitalize upon her already widespread popularity, tries to promote the image of herself as a diva, yet her methods for doing undercut any respect we may have for her, counteracting the superstar appeal. On Mariah's CD

cover, the emphasis is clearly on the physical, with appearance, beauty, and status coming through as thematic elements. Though she intends for these appeals to *pathos*, *logos*, and especially *ethos* to upgrade her image, they actually work against each other to break it down. Her clothing pushes the line of sexiness and strongly indicates that she wants to be seen for what she is, not who she is. In attempting to sell her body image, she greatly detracts from her image as a person we respect and who deserves an album entitled *#1's*.



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. Mariah's primary goal is to emphasize her popularity and thus sell her image through the use of *ethos*, using secondary appeals to *logos* and *pathos* (that draw upon her physical beauty and sexual appeal) to help support the suggestion of her diva status. Her first and most obvious attempt at *ethos* is the appearance of simply her first name in her signature font, suggesting that her popularity is so widespread that inclusion of her last name is unnecessary. Additionally, the two small images at the bottom support the theme of "beauty queen"/diva. The

butterfly is a recurring symbol from her past albums (again, she is popular enough to have a thematic emblem), which represents, even to the uninformed viewer, beauty, a little sweetness, and perhaps some sexiness. It is counterbalanced by the title of the album, *#1's*, which obviously has themes of importance and diva status. Both figures are intentionally small in order to focus our attention on her and her body, which reminds the viewer of her glamorous, superstar appeal.

By transferring our attention to her body, Mariah enables appeals through *logos* to persuade us to associate her with a model, supporting the diva image (*ethos*). The fact that the photo appears in black and white is significant, for it gives a classic feel and we reason that it seems to support the tradition of years of successful songs. The black and white look also creates a more professional aura, similar to those seen in sophisticated, glamorous ads or in model photo shoots. Also, the fact that she is standing against a blank wall mirrors the practice of models standing before a sheet and implies that she belongs among the likes of supermodels. Even her shadow, rather sharp, suggests bright light, like those they use in the modeling industry. So far, then, she has succeeded in effectively combining the appeals to *ethos* and *logos* to convince the viewer of her iconic, idol status.

However, the strength of her argument quickly fades away when her appeals to *pathos*, probably her strongest, are introduced. The very first aspect of the image that we focus on is her long, slender body, which she intends as yet another reason for which we should idolize her. She is blatantly going for the sexy look: a super-tight, super-short, low-cut dress (that wrinkles because it is so tight); a showcase of her long, sleek legs; strappy high heels; hair down; and dark, smoky make-up. Her body language is also very suggestive, the way she put her weight in one hip, popped her knee, and placed her hands on her hips. Her face, like Lauryn's, is not smiling and happy, yet she is definitely not contemplative. The way her lips are parted and she

looks enticingly out at the viewer only seems to complete the near-prostitute image. Overall, we see a very superficial, sexualized, beauty-oriented photograph. Her appeal to sexuality is a common use of *pathos*, and though intended to gain our admiration, she ironically most likely only succeeds in alienating, if not repulsing, some of her older fans with such a risqué image. She might also attract young teenage girls looking to become more beautiful and attractive in their insecurity, though most people would agree that she is far from an ideal role model. Additionally, since this is a best hits album and more likely to appeal to older, longtime fans, a more mature target audience would certainly not be as easily impressed by her sexiness as young adolescents. Thus the arguments of *pathos* that she hopes will equate her with an attractively alluring diva are instead read as promoting the sale of her body and self-respect, and ultimately undermining everything she sought to achieve.

Clearly the use of effective, cohesive visual rhetoric on album covers, as it does in all situations, greatly influences the viewer and convinces him/her of the ideas that are most important to the artist and that reveal their defining characteristics. Though the two cases examined here rely on many of the same visual rhetorical strategies, the way each individual exploits every type of appeal to suit their own style and background produces remarkably different results. While one cover very strongly but eloquently suggests a personal testimonial about a life recovering from the damage of “miseducation,” the other fails to put forth any consistent image to which the viewer can relate. Perhaps the reason for the ineffectiveness of Mariah’s CD cover is the confusion in our culture regarding a definition of what an idol should be. Certainly shows like *American Idol* express our concern about this matter and force us to evaluate whether we value physical perfection and sexual appeal (as Hollywood promotes) or more personality-related traits. Can we respect and idolize individuals who overemphasize their sexuality? Or those whose charisma and kindness are inspiring but have more average

physiques? Though the answers to these questions are difficult to answer and will probably continue to change throughout history, one thing will definitely remain constant: the power of artists to shape the public perception of themselves and their music through strongly related visual rhetorical appeals that do not simply act as isolated, individual arguments, but as active augmenters of each other to produce a unified whole.