



You may, like me, have seen the cover of the 14th of July New Yorker depicting a Barack Obama as a Muslim and Michelle Obama as a terrorist, with a portrait of Osama Bin Laden on the wall and an American flag burning in the fireplace, and understood that the intention was to satirize not them but the rumours against them, and nevertheless have felt this could not but backfire. In an [article](#)

published in The Chronicle of Higher Education, and subtitled "Cognition studies clash with 'New Yorker' rationale" Harvard psychologist Mahzarin Banaji explains why it is so:

I am, as are most others in my social class, an emphatic defender of the arts as a primary vehicle to irritate, aggravate, and offend. I have been trained to step back and rethink my reaction to that which jolts and nauseates me. I know that, in such moments especially, I must look within for a possible inability to transcend ingrained values. For that reason, and because we who read The Chronicle are likely to be among the staunchest supporters of the First Amendment, we must, of course, defend the right of The New Yorker to print the image it did.

What we need not defend is the absurd naïveté about the basic facts of information transmission that accompanied the reasoning behind the drawing.

David Remnick, editor of The New Yorker, in total disbelief about the reaction the cover received, said that "it's a satire about the distortions and misconceptions and prejudices about Obama." As it happens, I know something about distortions, misconceptions, and prejudices. Especially the type that make their way to us via images we are exposed to, such as that cover, by the sheer fact of living in an open society. That is why I find the Blitt-Remnick [Blitt is the artist] response, even more than the image itself, to be so unfortunate. Unfortunate because it shows that artists and their managers, by remaining in the isolated world of art or publishing, cut off from the basic facts of human nature and experience, of conscious and unconscious social perception, learning and memory, have no choice but to be startled by the mismatch between their lofty intentions to do the public some good through satire and the results of their clumsy actions.

The brain, Blitt would be advised to understand, is a complex machine whose operating principles we know something about. When presented with A and B in close spatial or temporal proximity, the mind naturally and effortlessly associates the two. Obama=Osama is an easy association to produce via simple transmogrification. Flag burning=unpatriotic=un-American=un-Christian=Muslim is child's play for the cortex. Learning by association is so basic a mechanism that living beings are jam-packed with it — ask any dog the next time you see it salivating to a tone of a bell. There is no getting around the fact that the very association Blitt helplessly confessed he didn't intend to create was made indelibly for us, by him.

It is not unreasonable, given the inquiring minds that read The New Yorker, to expect that an obvious caricature would be viewed as such. In fact, our conscious minds can, in theory, accomplish such a feat. But that doesn't mean that the manifest association (Obama=Osama lover) doesn't do its share of the work. To some part of the cognitive apparatus, that association is for real. Once made, it has a life of its own because of a simple rule of much ordinary thinking: Seeing is believing. Based

on the research of my colleague, the psychologist Daniel Gilbert, on mental systems, one might say that the mind first believes, and only if it is relaxing in an Adirondack chair doing nothing better, does it question and refute. There is a power to all things we see and hear — exactly as they are presented to us.

If the argument is that The New Yorker cover was meant to depict the radical right's ludicrous portrayal of Obama as an apologist for Islam and its fundamentalists, then the question we might pose is this: Would Blitt consider it good satirical strategy to condemn child sexual abuse by depicting a young adolescent boy and an older man, obviously just having had sex, fist-bumping with knowing pleasure? In what world would that constitute satire rather than a failed imagination?

(the full text is available [here](#))

Of course a culturalist critique of Banaji's article could argue that this kind of caricature is a well-entrenched Western cultural practice to be understood—and not judged—within its cultural context, and to the interpretation of which non-culture-specific cognitive science is irrelevant. But somehow, I am happy to say, I don't expect anyone to pursue this line of argument.