



## ***Teaching Cultural Competence in Print Advertising*** **Postmodern Ads and Multi-Race Clothing Models**

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**Abstract:** We recognize advertising imagery as propaganda for selling commodities but our students are less apt to recognize that it also reenacts the symbolic rituals of our postmodern society by implying the underlying structures of social stratification and power relations, of class, race, ethnicity, gender, language, sexual orientation, religion, age, and ability by using subtle visual tools. Postmodern “shock advertising” has presented some of the most controversial print ads in regard to race and sexual orientation, yet a more subtle ordering of differently raced models often reveals a hidden hierarchy that privileges blond and/or white models in clothing ads. This hierarchy can be the result of carefully manipulated photographic lighting, spatial placement, centering of a privileged model, and the strategic redesign of the less visually arresting zone of a photographic field. As in the case of some ads that are designed to appeal simultaneously to heterosexual and homosexual publics, advertisers have developed visual tactics that can simultaneously appeal to both a white public and consumers of color. Yet the subtle privileging of white models is still a norm.

Media literacy is essential in this contemporary culture where commercial visual images accost us daily in newspapers and newspaper inserts, magazines, on the internet, book covers, travel brochures, etc. The list is extensive in this increasingly visually based culture. Advertising culture may, in fact, be the one unifying culture that binds together our diversity as a North American people. In order to negotiate the seduction of advertising, students must be able to recognize how the seduction works to be free of its potentially undermining influence. We recognize advertising imagery as propaganda for selling commodities but our students are less apt

to recognize that it also reenacts the symbolic rituals of our postmodern society by implying the underlying structures of social stratification and power relations, of class, race, ethnicity, gender, language, sexual orientation, religion, age, and ability by using subtle visual tools.<sup>1</sup>

Advertising makes use of various visual tools, a large portion of them derived from the tradition of fine arts. Painters and sculptors have used these same visual tools for centuries, for structuring arresting, even shockingly graphic images, for assigning rank or status to human figures via size, posture, lighting and spatial placement, and for specifying a human figure’s social relation to the viewer. As we viewers of ad-

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vertisements have grown more sophisticated over the last decades, and as advertisements have become more costly to produce, advertisers look to provoke a quick emotional response from us to promote name brand recognition. Some ad campaigns have become so recognizable that they have shed almost all reference to a particular product and instead have delivered a catchy or “sexy” narrative to hook us in.<sup>2</sup>

Benetton’s “All colors of the World” and then “United Colors of Benetton” advertising campaigns, beginning in the mid 1980s and early 1990s respectively, were pioneers in such a “productless” campaign. The company fostered such a strong link between shocking graphic imagery and its corporate products that in some ads no product was even visible in the margin.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the same campaign reenacted social rituals potentially demeaning to marginalized groups. This occurred, for example, in an ad showing a close-up of a pair of male buttocks with the letters “H.I.V.” affixed and with no specific Benetton clothing revealed even in the margins of the photographic field.<sup>4</sup> In response to the ad some viewers resented what they

perceived as an erroneous and harmful association of the disease specifically and solely with a gay man and with gay culture. Unfortunately, for other viewers the association may have rung true, in keeping with that association of gay men and the origin and spread of the disease, and a divine justice wielded for a “dissolute, sinful life,” despite the lack of factual accuracy in the assumed link. Meanwhile, the Benetton Corporation benefited by earning some coveted name recognition in a marketing campaign that deliberately contrived ambiguity of association for corporate gain. Benetton became the fourth largest corporation in Italy as a result of “The United Colors of Benetton” campaign.<sup>5</sup>

Other Benetton ads in the “United Colors of Benetton” campaign featured ambiguous interactions between Caucasians and persons of color. In one ad a fulsome black woman suckles a tiny white child, opening the image to interpretation as a reenactment of the conditions of slavery in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century North America.<sup>6</sup> The ad depends for its effect on the viewer’s familiarity with the history of slavery in apprehending the purposeful presentation of a politically charged staging of the two people. In another campaign ad two children, one white and one black, face the viewer with hair arrangements that mimic an angel and a devil.<sup>7</sup> The white child is, of course, angelic while the black child is cast as the devil. So unfolds a racially based and reprehensible contrast of good and evil. The shock of a racial stereotyping was a deliberate ploy to draw a hip, youthful con-

<sup>1</sup> Contacted advertisers (Benetton, Nordstrom, Macy’s, JC Penney, Banana Republic, Old Navy, Sony) did not consent to have their ads reproduced or, in the case of Nordstrom and JC Penney, had returned or credited reproduction rights to the models who posed for the ads. Therefore I have indicated internet addresses where the ads mentioned above can be viewed. Using the “Google Images” search engine will also produce the ads. Only Sony articulated an unwillingness to be viewed in what they speculated might be a negative light; other advertisers simply declined without comment.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Cadbury’s chocolate TV advertisement that featured a drumming human-suited gorilla and resulted in increased sales of chocolate: see [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/7879763.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7879763.stm) (accessed February 16, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> A summer 2008 exhibition at the NRW-Forum in Dusseldorf, Germany, entitled *Radical Advertising*, surveyed the range and types of “shock advertising.”

<sup>4</sup> See [www.nikallday.com/toscanni.htm](http://www.nikallday.com/toscanni.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Anthony J. Cortese, in *Provocateur: Images of Women and Men in Advertising* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 27-36, discusses some types of visual ranking. See also Kim Sheehan, *Controversies in Contemporary Advertising* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004) for a discussion of stereotypes used in advertising.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://theinspirationroom.com/daily/2006/united-colors-of-benetton-1989/>.

<sup>7</sup> See [http://www.e-scoala.ro/comunicare/benetton\\_campanii\\_antirasism.html](http://www.e-scoala.ro/comunicare/benetton_campanii_antirasism.html).

sumer into the “savvy” and presumably ironic campaign. The corporation has banked on racial controversy as a name brand disseminator, and no doubt has delivered to some an image of how racism should still continue to be a viable social factor in today’s world.<sup>8</sup>

Some visual tools useful in decoding race in more mundane clothing advertisements are those that relay power placement. Traditionally painters and then graphic designers have given precedence to a center figure (think of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper*). It is commonplace in advertisements to privilege a white blond model, child, teen or adult, at the center of a mixed race grouping, or even an all white grouping where the other models have brown or black hair.<sup>9</sup> Much research on cultural competence in advertising indeed has focused on visual narratives constructed via words or situation, yet there is little focus on some specific visual tools for decoding, for example lighting in “live” and “dead” zones of the advertising field, areas where the eye naturally lingers in a visually enlivened zone, or where it rapidly skims moving on to more exciting visual pastures. Blond hair has long denoted beauty and coveted ethnicity. Yet when an advertiser may want to appear progressive by placing a person of color in the center, that center rank can be reduced in importance by various manipulations and still privilege the white blond model in the group. For example, a series of ads in a July 2007 mailer from Nordstrom’s department store show two white models and one black in fall clothing.<sup>10</sup> Since graphic designers have traditionally identified the left side of a clothing pair- or three-model photograph

as a potential “dead zone,” that zone can be assigned to an African American or model of another racial group while still privileging the white model placed on the right. Even when an African American model is placed on the right in the dominant zone, as in other Nordstrom flier ads, the white model can still be privileged on the left by increased lighting, and/or bright colored clothing, thereby establishing a hierarchy that puts the model on the right hand side in a visually subordinate role. The natural luminosity of blond hair and white face acts as a locus of visual interest. In ad photographs where three models are used, a centering of an African American model can be modulated and reduced in importance by simply bringing the models on the two sides forward and making them slightly overlap the center body. A white model to the left “dead” zone can become dominant by making that person actively posed while the others to the right are more passive in demeanor. In each of these cases, light, shadow, spatial proximity, overlapping and centering can be manipulated without actually giving the minority model visual precedence, while the traditional “dead zone” is enlivened. In this way an advertiser can appeal to consumers of color, appease or satisfy white consumers, and satisfy a progressive contemporary desire for egalitarian mixed racial groupings all at the same time. This approach is not dissimilar to the deliberately ambiguous ads aimed at both a heterosexual public and a homosexual one, where either public can interpret the image to suit the erotic needs of its own. This ambiguity permits more traditional heterosexuals to avoid direct awareness of a secondary market appeal to a homosexual public.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Nordstrom no longer has reproductive rights to this mailing, and I have not found the images online.

<sup>9</sup> See Cortese, 8-11, for a short discussion of the Benetton campaign and controversy.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://flickr.com/photos/35684989@N00/8420511/>.

<sup>11</sup> See, Gary Soldow, “Homosexualism in Advertising: Something for Everyone with Androgyny,” in *Sex in Consumer Culture: the Erotic Content of Media and Marketing*, Tom Reichert and Jacqueline Lambiase, eds. (Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 319-336.

In regard to lighting in clothing ads where there are models, I once heard Oprah Winfrey state on her television show (I forget the precise date) that when she appears in another television studio she brings a lighting technician with her. She does this, she has said, because in her estimation white lighting technicians do not know how to light black faces in an appealing or satisfactory way.<sup>12</sup> Something similar can occur in print clothing ads where black models' faces, by design, by accident or lack of know-how, appear unusually dark beside white faces, dark enough to make them less readable. In some contemporary clothing ads where five or so children may be persons of color, a single white blond child is illuminated from above, luring the viewer's eye to that area, and making it take visual precedence over the other children despite their numerical dominance.<sup>13</sup>

Some photographers and the advertisers who pay them have successfully undermined the power of the traditional left hand "dead zone" by strategically enlivening it. They have done so in what appears to be a desire to appeal to multiple racially defined publics. While many advertisers still privilege the center as blond/white or as simply white, others have moved be-

yond that traditional format to a greater flexibility in photo-marketing strategy. Still to come are usage of sound lighting techniques for darker faces and a greater willingness to "privilege" persons of color, or to do what some painters, for example Claude Monet in water lily paintings, have done since the second half of the nineteenth century—to remove a hierarchical ordering and value each and every inch of the representational field on the same level. However, Monet's may be an ideal not entirely worth reaching since many viewers of fine art images and advertisements, and perhaps most, anticipate a visual locus of some kind to anchor and guide viewing. Visual artists and photographers, for good reason, have more often than not avoided visual stratagems that let the eye simply wander across a visual field at will, preferring instead an organized field that makes a structured and pithy visual statement, whether about clothes on sale or faces in the news. Visually privileging ethnic models in ads with a racial mix, let's hope, may become more commonplace in an era that welcomes an African American president.

Teaching the visual material above as part of a much expanded lecture/discussion on a variety of stereotypes in advertising has brought much student awareness and useful dialogue. The classes to which I have presented advertising stereotypes have been composed primarily of teachers in training, social work and state-employed human rights professionals, a few members of a city police department, and a small group of art majors in a seminar. I have found that in beginning a session with the provocative Benetton image of a black woman breast-feeding a white child the students with some in-depth knowledge of African-American history have been the ones to understand the reference to the institution of slavery. I can then guide discussion toward the importance of knowing the specific histories of marginalized groups as a critical tool for uncovering stereotypes. I

<sup>12</sup> See Lee Varis, *Skin: The Complete Guide to Digitally Lighting, Photographing, and Retouching Faces and Bodies* (Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing, 2006), for a recent effort to recommend digital lighting strategies for many ethnic skin colorations.

<sup>13</sup> Macy's declined to make this type of ad available for reproduction. Nicole Belle complained that Republicans had deliberately darkened black faces in an election campaign TV ad in "NRCC Darkens Ashwin Media's Face In Ads," posted Thursday Oct 30, 2008 12:44pm on Crooks and Liars: <http://crooksandliars.com/nicole-belle/nrcc-darkens-ashwin-madias-face-ads> (accessed February 19, 2009). A blog site frequented by professional photographers hosted a discussion of how to adequately light African American faces beginning in 2003: <http://www.thephotoforum.com/forum/graphics-programs-photo-gallery/1219-how-light-erum-african-americans.html> (accessed February 19, 2009).

can also guide discussion toward the strategic use of irony and ambiguity in the Benetton campaign's potentially courting different sectors of the public, as well as the ads' capitalization on human suffering. The follow-up angel/devil stereotype, on the other hand, is so easy to recognize that students gain confidence right away in their ability to ferret out corporate strategy. Comments can range from "In our culture white stands for purity and innocence" to "Darkness is scary and evil, and that's how we whites feel about black men," the latter requiring some sensitive deconstruction in relation to the origins of white fear of black men.

The subtleties of mixed race clothing model ads can take more time to recognize. Yet usually after two or three of these in a series where the staging evolves as does the advertisers' mixing of appeal to both black and white audiences, students, even those with no visual literacy background, become eager and adept at pointing to lighting effects, clothing coloration, hair, skin color, and gestures that privilege white models. Only a few students have not seen much relevance in this analysis, and lacking visual literacy, may not have been convinced by the substance or usefulness of visual codes. The majority, on the other hand, is energized by their newly found ability to delve into the strategic structures of ads which they might have otherwise passed over without analysis. Even better, they vow to watch for what comes next in corporate clothing advertising and model staging. Improving student visual literacy is critical in this contemporary culture so increasingly visually based. Teaching students to decode advertisements where stereotypes appear not only enhances their ability to resist essentialist typing, but also gives them tools to resist advertising propaganda by making corporate manipulation visible.