

COMS 101: Introduction to Mass Communication

Lecturers: Mohammed Musa, Jim Tully, David Shellock, Sue Tait

Tutor: Jeanette Forbes

Due: Monday 7 October 2002

Essay 2

Analysis of representations of ethnic differences in advertising.

Select either a travel brochure or a print advertisement which features a person/people who are not Pakeha. Analyse the way in which ethnic and/or cultural difference is represented in the advertisement through its use of linguistic and visual signs.

Advertising companies are often criticised for not turning to people who are not of White European descent for their campaigns. Of course, persons like Naomi Campbell or 'Uncle Ben' are now well known by the audience, but they are the exception that confirms the rule.

One company decided to alleviate this shortage: Benetton. Conversely to the hidden conventions, they, with the help of the Eldorado agency and their photograph Oliviero Toscani, chose ethnicity as a core theme of their advertising campaigns and then claimed their originality in the way they were advertising and denouncing racism at the same time. Analysing Benetton's ads is therefore particularly interesting, as trying to find out what is different from the other ads where different ethnic groups are represented, but also to know if their goal is achieved.

The ads that are analysed are part of Benetton's first campaigns in the mid eighties and the early nineties. Their analyse will lead to see what myths the Italian firm is trying to convey. Eventually this analyse should demonstrate if Benetton's ads are that much different from their counterparts regarding non-militant firms.

Analysing Benetton's ads through time should allow us to see how the firm evolved in its message, which became more accurate, but also more ambiguous. The first analysed ad can be considered as a starting point in many ways: it is the turning point when Benetton decided to choose ethnic diversity to represent their brand; it is the moment when they started activism against racism as their bottom line. The ad is part of the 1984 campaign. A group of children is standing in front of a white background, their age varying from about four to twelve. They are wearing colourful summer clothes; some of them have a hat on. They are playing with big balloons of different bright

colours, so that the shot looks like a birthday party. But the most important thing is that the children belong to different ethnic group: African, Asian, Hispanic and European. These are the only signs on the photo: there are no linguistic or graphic signs. It is therefore useful to know that the picture was just one among others in the campaign, and on the other ads the logo of the firm was conspicuous.

The next two ads were released in 1989. On the first one you can see a woman with a red cardigan who is breast feeding a baby. The woman is of African descent and the baby is white. The photo is centred in such a way that the woman is dismembered, only her breast is shown. However there is nothing sexual in it: she is represented as a mother, caring of her baby. The second picture is also characterised by dismemberment: there two hand, one is black and the other is one, tied by handcuffs. They are apparently male hands, as the two persons seem to be standing up. The two men seem to wear the same grey tweed all purpose suit. Both ads are anonymous. In addition, the only other sign on the pictures is the logo of the firm, “United Colors of Benetton”, written in white block letters on a green background, but the logo is relatively small and discarded on the edge.

On the last selected ad, which dates back to 1991, there are three characters. On the left side is a woman. She is blonde and light-eyed, and corresponds to the pattern of beauty of the Western European woman. On the left side is a black man. They are both holding a baby, who is of Asian-descent. A blanket is holding them together. The hands of the two adults are overlapping on the baby’s belly, conveying an impression that they are a family, parents holding their baby. They are not smiling, just staring at the camera. The logo is similarly present in the edge of the picture.

No matter how different the shots can be, they all tend to have similar connotations. Indeed there are recurrent themes in Benetton's ads. They often have recourse to children and babies to represent their brand. Here they are present in three of the four ads selected. Children are a common allegory for innocence and their reaction to racism is different from adults¹. They do not classify the people they meet in racist categories. The children in the first ad seem to be able to have a party regardless to the descent of the hosts. The baby does not probably care about the colour of the breast that is feeding him. The role of the Asian baby in the fourth ad is less obvious. Certainly, he is not able to realise that, genetically speaking, he could never be the offspring of such a couple. Moreover, he is in the middle of the picture and thus seems to be its most important element. It also looks like his left fist is raised as a sign of protest. Adding to this the defying look of his parents, and this shot conveys the impression that this family is asserting their (impossible) existence.

The other striking impression conveyed by the ads would correspond to the linguistic feature of oxymoron. In his pictures most of the time Oliviero Toscani plays on the opposition between the skin colours: 'Black and White' in the second and third ads, 'Black, White and Yellow' in the first and fourth ads. The skin colours are all the more so contrasted as the models are always standing in front of a white background. This contrast is counterbalanced by the fact that there is always a linking element in the pictures, that is to say that the models are always interacting with each other. The balloons enable the children to play together. The woman is feeding the baby who is leaning against her. The handcuffs have a double meaning: in a pessimistic point of view the two men did something wrong together so now they are punished together. On an optimistic point of view they tied each other not to be separated, as protesters

¹ Toscani, 1994

sometimes do when they are about to be scattered by the police. On the fourth picture the blanket brings the family together.

What are then the myths created by all these signs? Mainly, in a sheer material concern, these all mean that Benetton's clothes are just like the world: of all colours. Conveying this impression was the goal of the first campaigns, and after a while it gave birth to the current slogan of the trade, 'United Colors of Benetton', in 1986. However it appeared pretty soon that the Italian firma was aiming for a greater fate. As Lucian Benetton said, "Advertising is not meant to sell more. It is about institutional advertising realised to communicate the firm's values." Indeed in the end, the clothes do not even appear in the ads, most models being naked. The myth created by the ads thus deals with more universal values. It is about tolerance and cosmopolitanism. There is no segregation. The advertisers want to show that ethnic groups can live in harmony. To that extent these ads take exactly the opposite attitude of the usual criticisms made to ads that feature people from non-European descent. They are not about the exotic other, but about an everyday person. It is also noticeable that when Benetton represent the other, they make appear European people as well, which then become an ethnic group just like another.

However Benetton can also be subject to criticisms. First, some of their pictures can be ambiguous. For example, the picture with the woman breast-feeding was really resented by African-Americans, who saw there the stereotype of the Black nanny. Most recent campaigns were even more ambiguous. For example, in 1992, Benetton decided to give up on its usual studio shots and released a campaign based on pictures that could have been directly taken from a journalist's report. One represented an albinos girl

stared at with great curiosity by a whole tribe of African people, all of them dressed in traditional outfits. Another one was apparently representing a soldier, with a machinegun slung across his shoulder and holding a thighbone. These ads could be accused to represent African people as primitive and backward, whereas they just wanted to show that “to be tolerant of diversity is not easy, no matter its form”. The danger of polysemy is very high when it comes to the representation of ethnicity in advertisement.

Analysing Benetton’s ads is really interesting in the way that the firm claimed its ability to advertise differently and its activism in the fight against racism. Benetton’s ads feature diverse ethnic groups more than any other company, as shown in the sample selected. Playing with the contrast between the skin colours and the feeling of solidarity between all races, Benetton and its now famous photograph Oliviero Toscani gained a foothold for the idea of cosmopolitanism.

Today Benetton has become a reference in the world of advertising and beyond. Jonathan Bignell wrote “the ad is constructed to make this shaping of the same mythic meaning appear automatic and unsurprising, whereas in fact it only exists by virtue of the ad’s structure”. Regarding Benetton, they used this to make tolerance and melting pot appear natural. They did it so well that now the expression ‘a la Benetton’ is used to describe a crowd/world where race mix is a bottom line.

1566 words

Bibliography:

Readings:

- Jonathan Bignell, "Advertisements" in *Media Semiotics: An Introduction*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997.
- Michael O'Shaughnessy, "Reading Images" in *Media and Society: An Introduction*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- William O'Barr, "Representations of Others: Contemporary Print Advertisements", in *Culture and the Ad: Exploring Otherness in the World of Advertising*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1994.

Websites:

- www.benetton.com
- www.ucad.fr/pub/virt/mp/benetton/pub_benetton.html
- www.comanalysis.ch/ComAnalysis/Publication29.htm
- www.ivy2001.org/infobase/press/01_09_25DEU_benetton_fr_un.htm