

UNIT B2.2

IMAGES OF THE OTHER

'we have moved from a *logocentric* (word-centred) to an *occulo centric* (image-centred) world' (Berger AA (1995:79)); Baudrillard (1993:194)

Cooke, M. (1997) 'Listen to the Image Speak', *Cultural Values* 1: 1pp. 101–2, 104, 105, 106 (extracts)

TEXT B2.2.1

M. Cooke

I argue that the major block to respect of and communication with the unknown is preconception built on the weak and resilient foundations of myth and image. Images are flat impressions that provide pieces of information. They are like photographs that frame and freeze a fragment of the real and then project it as the whole. What was dynamic and changing becomes static. Just as a snapshot provides a true, if partial, picture, so these cultural images contain some truth. That is why they are so hard to change. Just as the image of the amoral, free-living American woman epitomizes for many pious Muslims all that is wrong with Western culture, so the image of the veiled woman encapsulates for the Western observer all the coercion imagined to mark Islamic culture. Women are easily turned by outsiders into emblems of their culture, for within the culture itself women are often made into custodians of their culture's values. No matter how many non-promiscuous, modest Western women the Muslim may meet, no matter how many assertive, independent, unveiled Muslim women the Westerner may meet, there is a possibility that the basic image will not change as these individuals come

to be seen as exceptions to a rule that they thereby serve to reinforce. These images are the context of a first encounter between two people who know little if anything about each other.

DECONSTRUCTION: culture is conveyed through images (ex. Western/Muslim women)

Images we have of each other are always part of the baggage that we bring to dialogue. Sometimes we are at the mercy of the image our addressee has of us or chooses to invoke. Sometimes we hide behind the image. Sometimes we act as though neither of us had an image of the other. Sometimes, those ideal times, the image disappears and the contact is unmediated by the myth. Then we can act as individuals between whom messages pass easily regardless of the contact, code, or context.

In September 1996, the Aspen Institute Berlin invited me to participate in a conference entitled 'The Images of Muslim Women in the West'. Throughout the summer I wondered why the image of Muslim women as passive and oppressed has so much power. I have come to believe that this is probably the case because 'Muslim Women' refers not only to a specific group but also to a general category. They are only sometimes both Muslim and women; they are often fused into a single category – Muslims in general and even so nebulous a concept as 'Islam', a term covering both the religion and the culture. However, regardless of whether the reference to 'Muslim Women' is

specific women who happen to be Muslims, or slips seamlessly into the general (women who represent a faith and a culture), their look is the same: they are more or less exotic, more or less veiled, more or less armed. The meanings attached to their uniform appearance will differ depending on whether it is the Muslim or the woman who is being considered – a victim of patriarchy or a symbol of a fanatic faith.

General image (stereotype) of the Muslim woman (culture and religion)

Since the general association with Islam is the most common, and Islam has long been negatively portrayed in the West, it is not surprising that its key emblem, women, should also be subject to sensationalist misrepresentation. Most Muslim women and men live in Asia and Africa, hence they are not only Muslim but also Asians and Africans. When we think about them, try to represent them, and teach about them, we run the risk of confounding geographic, linguistic, racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural categories. Thus, the fact that they are Syrian, Indonesian, Nigerian, Pakistani and American women, who speak dozens of languages and derive from a great many ethnic roots, becomes less significant than that they happen to practice a particular faith. After all, we can more easily identify as Muslim, rather than Egyptian or Pakistani, a woman we see in some form of purdah. The faith position overrides all other particularities to become the primary identity.

Islam: The faith position overrides all other

particularities to become the primary identity (regardless of their nationality or language)

Journalists and scholars in the USA are fascinated by this assumed homogeneity of the Muslim world. Far from wanting to complicate this image, many seem intent on reinforcing it. The image is an object of desire. As Bhabha writes (1994:75), the stereotype ‘gives access to an “identity” which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defense, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it’.

Instead of debunking this myth of homogeneity, the media reinforce it.

DECONSTRUCTION: culture is conveyed through images (ex. Western/Muslim women)

General image (stereotype) of the Muslim woman (culture and religion)

Islam: The faith position overrides all other particularities to become the primary identity (regardless of their nationality or language)

Instead of debunking this myth of homogeneity, the media reinforce it.



Task B2.2.1

- Do you agree with Cooke that, when we meet a person for the first time, the images (i.e. preconceptions) we have of people of a similar background will partly determine how we react to, and interact with, that person?
- How important a part do you think visual images we have come across of people of a similar background play in these preconceptions?
- Can you think of an occasion in your own experience on which an individual from a different background has been seen by you or by someone else as an 'exception to a rule'?

Task B2.2.3



Before reading Text B2.2.2, look carefully at Figure 8, a photograph of a Benetton advertisement.



Figure 8 Benetton's 'Angel and Devil' advertisement

- What is your overall reaction to the image in the advertisement?
- What messages, if any, does the image convey to you about race?
- Now read what Oliviero Toscani says about this advertisement:

'It took me one year to find these two children because I wanted them to look just like that. . . in the history of painting angels are blonde, devils are black. So it's a stereo type... but it's up to you to look deeper than that.'

What do you think about what Toscani says?

Solomos, J. and Back, L. (1996) *Racism and Society*, London: Macmillan pp.186–190 (extracts)

. . . what we have seen in recent times is an attempt by some multinational corporations to develop a transnational advertising aesthetic. Perhaps the best and most perplexing example of this is the clothes manufacturer Benetton. Through the camera of Oliviero Toscani, Benetton J. Solomos and L. Back have attempted to promote a message of human unity and harmony in their advertising. Starting in 1984 they attempted to represent the world's diverse people and cultures as synonymous with the many colours of Benetton's produce. Since then their campaigns have provoked unparalleled controversy, winning them awards and adulation alongside accusations of hypocrisy and opportunism.



Figure 9 A Benetton billboard poster, 1991

One of the striking features of the Benetton campaigns is the degree to which their message of transcultural unity is predicated upon absolute images of racial and cultural difference. The initial campaigns alluded to past and present conflict through the presentation of archetypal images of Jews and Arabs embracing the globe. What is intriguing about this move is that Benetton's products do not have to be shown in order to convey meanings about the brand quality; the message is simply resolved by the motif juxtaposed over the images of boundaries and conflicts. The 'United Colors of Benetton' becomes the antithesis of conflict, the expression of unity, the nurturer of internationalism (Back and Quaade 1993). However, what is more troubling about this strategy is the degree to which it is reliant on racism's very categories of personhood and the stereotypes which run from these. The example reproduced here (Figure 9) shows three young people poking their tongues out at the viewer. This advertisement was used in a poster campaign in 1991. The message of transcendence encapsulated in Benetton's slogan only makes sense if it is superimposed on a representation of clear difference. These three figures are coded through a grammar of absolute racial difference: the blue-eyed blond white Aryan figure, flanked respectively by a 'Negroid' black child and an 'Oriental' child. This message of unity can only work if it has a constitutive representation of absolute racial contrast. The danger with such representations is that they rely on a range of racial archetypes that are themselves the product of racism and as a result make racial atavism socially legitimate forms of common-sense knowledge: the concept of race is left unchallenged.

DECONSTRUCTION: even if Benetton's campaign 'united colours of Benetton' wants to promote unity- reinforcing the archetypal images that we have of race.

One of the most interesting things about Toscani's photography is the ways in which he plays with ambiguity. The most dramatic example of this included a picture showing the hands of two women, one black and the other white, handcuffed together; and a picture of the torso of a black woman breast-feeding a white baby released in 1989. The reaction to these ads varied according to national context. In the United States, they were withdrawn following public complaint. The later image conjured the historical experience of slavery and the position of black women within a gendered and racialised system of exploitation, including their designation as objects of white sexual desire. In the United States and Britain, the image of handcuffed hands evoked notions of black criminality; far from suggesting two women united in incarceration. The advertisement was associated with the daily reality of young black men arrested by predominantly white law enforcement agencies....

Images do not always work the way we want them to.

While Benetton were very much in the vanguard of this type of imagery during the 1980s, other companies have also embraced the idea of imbuing their brand quality with a transnational ethos. In 1995, British Airways ran a newspaper campaign that presented two brides, a Danish woman in a white long dress alongside an Indian woman in a bride's red sari. The caption read: 'There are more things that bring us together than keep us apart'. The assertion of cultural translation and commensurability – the common reference being that despite ritual differences these two women were both brides – is harnessed to the airline's capacity to bring people together physically. This bears all the hallmarks of the Benetton campaigns of the mid 1980s. One could replace the British Airways' caption with Benetton's and the advertisement would work with equal effect. This intertextual quality can be found in the imagery of other companies too. Philips uses a blond-haired white girl and a black boy alongside the caption 'The universal language of Philips'. Again the two children are united through their consumption of the commodity, with a black and a white thumb sharing the control panel. This advertisement actually appeared in the newspaper that Benetton produced called Colors. Colors is an extraordinary publication because it effectively turns news items into Benetton advertising (Back and Quaade 1993). The intertextual reference made within this advertisement produces a kind of corporate multiculturalism that trades on images of human diversity in order to produce an aesthetic that satisfies and appeals to a global market. This move can be identified within companies as diverse as the drinks magnate Coca-Cola and the Reebok sports shoe manufacturer, reflecting the way in these companies have embraced a transnational ethos within their imagery to fit in with their global markets. What is common to these campaigns is that they all, in various ways, espouse common humanity and harmony while reinforcing cultural and racial archetypes. At worst they steer a symbolic course that is perilously close to a legacy of crude racist images and associations...

Using racial images became a trend, thus reinforcing stereotypes to trade on them.

We are making two related points. First, what we have referred to as corporate multi-culturalism possesses a dual quality. While it espouses the goal of transcultural unity, it does so through reinforcing crude cultural and racial archetypes. These images operate within what Stuart Hall (1981) called a 'grammar of race'. The overpowering reference point is that race is real: racial archetypes provide the vehicle for the message, and racial common sense is overbearingly present such that the reality of race is legitimated within this media discourse. Second, the valuation and repackaging of cultural difference within contemporary media result in little more than a process of market-driven recolonisation, where the fetish for the exotic reaffirms these various 'global others' as distinct and separate types of humankind. In this context, the veneration of difference need not be in any contradiction with white supremacy. Quite the contrary: it can be integrally connected with the formation of contemporary cultures of racism. Yet, we also want to argue that these shifts do create important ambivalences and tensions which can unsettle the valence of racism within popular culture.

Market driven recolonization: it is easy to go from race to racism

 DECONSTRUCTION: even if Benetton's campaign 'united colours of Benetton' wants to promote unity- reinforcing the archetypal images that we have of race. Images do not always work the way we want them to.

Using racial images became a trend, thus reinforcing stereotypes to trade on them.

Market driven recolonization: it is easy to go from race to racism

➤ Do you agree with the interpretation by Solomos and Back of the advertisement in Figure 9? ➤ Think of contemporary advertisements in different forms of the mass media in your own cultural context, which might be said to produce trade on 'images of human diversity in order to produce an aesthetic that satisfies and appeals to a global market'. Do you believe that these advertisements reinforce 'cultural and

racial archetypes' at the same time as espousing common humanity and harmony?

Commentary

The view of Solomos and Back that much 'transnational' advertising espouses 'common humanity and harmony while reinforcing cultural and racial archetypes'

Many advertisers are 're-inforcing cultural and racial archetypes'