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Interpretability and social power, or, why postmodern advertising works

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Postmodern media culture enacts what Jameson (1991: x) associates more generally with postmodernism itself, namely, 'the consumption of sheer commodification as a process', which can be contrasted with modernism's still minimal and tendential 'critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend itself'. The postmodern consumption of 'commodification as a process' indicates the development of a qualitatively different level of consumption to the modern consumption of the commodity as a reified thing. Modern consumption is dependent on an actualized aesthetic gratification derived from the possession of or dynamic encounter with the commodity itself. This dependence makes the commodity susceptible to dialectical critique since the desire gratified through 'false' or manipulated satisfactions involves a substitution that can be deconstructed for its mass utopian content (Buck-Morss, 2000; Jameson, 1990; Morris, 2001a). There is thus a need to offer an account of the postmodern consumption of commodification as a process that addresses this new form of mass culture. The present study is intended to complement philosophical accounts such as Jameson's that take the analysis of the cultural logic of postmodernism seriously. It does so by analyzing the concept of interpretive power.

It is commonplace to recognize in contemporary media culture a tendency toward 'hyperreality' (Baudrillard, 1994), which is associated with the greatly expanded and intensified use of images and simulations in all areas of communication and culture. The predominance of an image culture seems to de-emphasize the cognitive generation of meaning that is achieved through the linguistically mediated logic of text or speech. The use of images reduces communicatively achieved meaning to the circulation of what, for some, have become undeconstructable 'intensities'

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(Lyotard, 1993) and simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994). While it is highly unlikely that postmodern commodification and consumption have simply replaced ideology and religion as the principal binding forms that give 'real' meaning to people's lives (Raaij, 1993), these processes nevertheless pose significant challenges to the maintenance of coherent and enduring interpretive communities.

Yet consumers are today generally expected to be far more aware of the manipulation presented in ads. They are also assumed to be capable of recognizing the increasingly intertextual references in advertising (Hitchon and Jura, 1997) that invite more active participation in the commodification process – a complicity between advertiser and audience (O'Donohoe, 2001). This intensification and development of symbolic manipulation in contemporary media culture requires significant reflective interpretive action on the part of the consumer, a requirement that is largely absent in modern advertising. For example, Goldman and Papson (1994: 31–6), in a well-cited study of new practices in visual media, identify 'hyperreal' video techniques of the shaky or searching camera, image graininess, discontinuous editing and the amateur techniques of home video that 'connote a sense of unmediated reality' and everyday life while simultaneously drawing attention to the mediated nature of the presentation. Besides the hyperreal, the authors describe techniques of 'hypersignification' (which is their substitute term for fetishism) that involve 'photographic decentering' of products and topics through extreme abstraction of human body parts. Viewers are nevertheless required to address the 'interpretive reflexivity' of such advertising imagery that foregrounds its constructed nature at the same time as it attempts to draw the viewer into its signifying strategy. Such ads, Goldman and Papson (1994: 43–9) conclude, invite viewers to use the products and/or the messages to signify appropriate meanings for themselves, thereby minimizing the resistance to traditional positioning that media-literate consumers have developed. While Goldman and Papson provide a fine description of this development in advertising media, they do not explain how this condition is achieved. The sociological and cognitive implications of this situation are investigated in this article.

Drawing on Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action and his notion of intelligibility, I argue that postmodern media culture increasingly relies upon an orientation toward validity that the 'commodity aesthetics' (Haug, 1986) of earlier advertising either minimized or did not require. Accompanying this demonstration is a contextualization and analysis of an emblematic case of postmodern advertising. I conclude that, far from necessarily signaling a profound crisis in meaning as commentators such as Goldman and Papson affirm, a postmodern media culture that relies more and more on the interpretive 'communicative competence' of its addressees suggests both greater potential power for cultural commodification as well

as greater potential resistance to this by consumers. I begin with an analysis of the idea of interpretive action.

Interpretive action and the claim to intelligibility

Immediacy in communication could only be a feature of pre-symbolic interaction. Purely instinctual or genetically determined behaviors operate with codes but not symbols, gestures but not words.¹ This is because any system that circulates symbolically mediated information requires continual translation operations at a different logical level to that of the symbolic itself. A symbol is, from its own perspective, simply representational since it embodies form, a form it nevertheless acquires only from structural relations with other symbols within a grammatical set. But the symbol can be set off this way for observers or users of symbols only by the translation operations themselves. From the perspective of a cognitive system, recognizing meaning reduces the complexity of the informational environment such that patterns of action or behavior can be established that are mediated by semantic form. Information becomes meaningful because signifiers are generated and comprehended within the system, which indicates that at least two distinct moments or activities are required: (a) selection and (b) interpretation. Both moments are internally related while being analytically and qualitatively distinct.

This requirement of interpretation reveals that a distinct phenomenological domain of experience is created in a symbolic system. Signifiers may always exist in structural relations to one another, but they only emerge at all in historical situations in which their meaning both constitutes and is constituted by communicating subjects. This intersubjective activity always involves the production of meaning precisely because contextualization must constantly be achieved in any communicative system that relies on semantic exchange within the cognitive domain. Understanding this activity thus becomes a key social scientific counterpart to analyzing the formal structure of any communication system.

Habermas (1984, 1987) is one of the best-known contemporary theorists to have foregrounded this intersubjectivity via a pragmatist and materialist theory of communicative action that brings interpretive social science together with systems theory. His work is worth examining in some detail regarding his theory of interpretive action. It provides not only a compelling account of the pragmatics of interpersonal – or ‘intersubjective’ – communication but helps explain the subjective communicative encounter with contemporary systems of mass communication. As I shall argue in the second part of this article with reference to postmodern advertising, Habermas’s hermeneutic explanation of interpretation can help to reveal a key moment in the consumption of contemporary media culture that

sustains itself today in the face of encroaching systems rationalities as well as 'aestheticization processes' (Welsch, 1996).

Habermas maintains that the rationality of communicative speech acts is logically different from the rationalities of function, strategy, instrument, power, domination or exclusion. He regards the linguistic medium to be primary (if not dominant) in rational social coordination. The reason for this is that the human use of language is fundamentally oriented toward 'reaching understanding and agreement' (*Verständigung*) among communicating subjects, an orientation that establishes the context for all other intentional action orientations and contexts. Interpretive activity oriented to mutual understanding and agreement through linguistic exchange is what Habermas calls 'communicative action'.

At the core of communicative action is a pragmatically conceived set of cognitive relations to the world that are centered on the action of raising and redeeming claims to validity. In Habermas's sense of a fully developed grammatical language, one can distinguish three distinct phenomenological domains of experience that organize the semantic fields of reference. One may distinguish historical culture from an objective nature, the self from other selves with whom one shares relations, and private personhood (the unique, internal life of the self or individual soul) from the social life shared with others. In the communicative speech act, one seeks agreement with others because 'validity claims' are raised that must be 'redeemed' if action coordination is to occur. These claims are expressed in the cognitive relations taken up to each distinct domain of the lifeworld that become themes of the speech act. In any communicative act, according to Habermas, a speaker expresses claims to validity corresponding to each domain of the lifeworld. These validity claims may be accepted, rejected or left undecided by a hearer, but they cannot be avoided in normal speech. As a result of this necessity of raising and redeeming of validity claims, communicative action is always oriented toward reaching understanding and agreement.

'Reaching understanding', it should be noted, is nevertheless a complex achievement in speech action, irreducible to its cognitive dimension. Yet the cognitive can be analyzed fruitfully in terms of the distinct pragmatic presuppositions that correspond to the relations taken up to the worlds of meaning. Accordingly, any communicative utterance indicates that (a) a speaker and hearer assume the right normative context of legitimate intersubjective relations in which the utterance is spoken, (b) a true statement will be accepted as knowledge by a hearer, and (c) the speaker's beliefs, intentions, feelings and so on, are expressed truthfully, such that the hearer will give credence to what is said (Habermas, 1984: 307–8). The speech act hence refers to an entity that 'appears to the speaker as something objective, social, or subjective' (Habermas, 1987: 120).² The worlds of meaning corresponding to distinct validity claims are rendered

cognitive precisely by the unique orientation toward validity. The fact that there are aesthetic events also associated with 'reaching understanding' goes without saying, and this aesthetic dimension of understanding cannot be abstracted away. But for the purposes of the present study, I would like to bracket the aesthetic components of understanding in speech in order to focus on the pragmatic logic of speech communication that lends itself to the analysis presented here.

Following Kant and Weber, we may recognize specialized discourses that have arisen in modernity (under additional pressures of systemic differentiation) which concern these world relations and their corresponding validity claims – science, for example, relates to and makes claims about the objective world, moral and political discourses the social world, psychology and art criticism the inner or 'expressive' world. There are, in other words, idioms of scientific, philosophical and aesthetic inquiry that constitute communication communities and their discourses in relation to each phenomenological world. But beyond such specialized discourses, the three analytically distinct object worlds are experienced together in everyday speech and the knowledge about them is sedimented in the phenomenological 'background' of the lifeworld itself.

All information in these domains must be selected and interpreted according to contextual frameworks or 'situations' of meaning that require a certain amount of previously established agreement. Sensory perception is one important selecting process, which is necessary but not yet sufficient for cognitive activity. Following G.H. Mead, Habermas views the acquisition of the autonomous communicative competencies associated with the development of a reflective individuated being (that which Mead groups under the heading, 'the self') as essential for cognition and indeed for participation in any communication community. The most important moment for cognitive (interpretive) action, for Habermas, is the successful achievement of mutual understanding and agreement between individuated communicative subjects who recognize in each other the autonomy and responsibility constitutive of their own selves (see Habermas, 1992a). What I wish to emphasize in this moment, which accounts for the socially coordinating 'success' of communication, is the action through which the contextual frameworks of each communicative event are established.

A speaker's utterances require from a hearer a certain level or overlap of consistent mutual interpretation if speaker and hearer are to successfully communicate. Cognitive understanding and agreement are entwined in communicative action. Even if the hearer utterly rejects the validity claim being raised in the speech act, the hearer will still have reached an understanding with the speaker over some aspect of the meaning contained in the utterance. One cannot disagree with someone without already having enacted some common understanding of the terms of the disagreement. A hearer, in responding to the communicative utterance of a speaker, will

have brought forth with the speaker a part of the lifeworld that both then inhabit in the communication. For Habermas, communicative action occurs through the action of raising and redeeming validity claims against the phenomenological background of a shared lifeworld. The universality of the orientation toward validity assumes that rational agreement and understanding are always enacted in everyday life and, to greater or lesser extents, at every level of society. Indeed, it is just this 'always already' orientation toward validity that indicates the rational core of communicative action despite all kinds of more or less unavoidable contingency, distortions or manipulations in actual communication.

But many critical discussions of Habermas's theory, especially those that focus their critique on the formal rationality immanent to this orientation toward agreement or on its compartmentalization of reason and the world via the cognitive object domains, forget the fourth validity claim he identifies. The fourth validity claim really stands prior to the other three and serves to set up the rationality he then identifies in the formal validity claims and their unique relations to each phenomenologically distinct domain of experience. This fourth validity claim is that of intelligibility.³ In making any communicative utterance, the communicating subject assumes that the utterance will be intelligible. In other words, he or she raises the claim of comprehension itself. All communicative utterances hence assume sense-making action on the part of both speaker and hearer, which means that there is no essential difference at this level between speaking, writing or other forms of symbolically mediated communication.

This claim to comprehension, however, cannot be conceived as a formal pragmatic validity claim like those Habermas identifies in the other three relations to the lifeworld. This is because it involves claims to communicative ability and communicative intent in themselves, which presents the most abstract kind of claim one can make about communicating subjects. It suggests an ontological condition rather than a pragmatic set of conditions of communication.⁴ While Habermas does quite clearly conceive this claim to comprehension as a validity claim in his early programmatic essays on the topic of the universal pragmatics of communication (1973, 1979), it is, even in this formulation, a special kind of claim. Indeed, he states that a speaker makes a claim to be '*Uttering* something understandably' in which a 'comprehensible [*verständlich*] expression' must be chosen in order for speaker and hearer to understand each another at all (1979: 2). By the end of this essay, however, Habermas has translated this claim to understanding onto the plane of the linguistic medium itself. This is because it becomes clear that a claim to comprehension – which elsewhere is called the general claim to 'communicative competence' (Habermas, 1970) – does not have its own distinguishable object world like the other validity claims. It rather expresses communicative empowerment and capacity at the most elemental level. There is an important limit reach here, for there is an unavoidable

circularity in using language to make claims about language. Hence Habermas introduces the linguistic medium as 'a special region', since language 'remains in a peculiar half-transcendence in the performance of our communicative actions and expressions, it presents itself . . . as a segment of reality *sui generis*' (Habermas, 1979: 67).

In *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas speaks in this same way about the lifeworld rather than language itself, and the concepts remain very closely associated in his theory. Like language as a medium, the lifeworld itself cannot become an actual theme of communicative utterances. That is, as the phenomenological 'place of giving place' it cannot become an object about which one can make a validity claim in the way that one can make a claim about the other object worlds (the objective, social and inner worlds). The lifeworld is the ground and, to use Husserl's image, presents the 'horizon' within which sense-making occurs. As such, it presents a limit or, rather, *the* limit for philosophical and social scientific inquiry. Even though we can identify the lifeworld conceptually as that which provides or brings forth this horizon and space within which we communicate, it cannot itself become an object of inquiry in the way that all the objects within its horizons can be. Thus the lifeworld is 'at once unquestionable and shadowy . . . it remains indeterminate' (Habermas, 1987: 132). It has this peculiar nature, I would argue, for the same reasons that the linguistic medium in Habermas's earlier essays 'remains in a peculiar half-transcendence' in communicative action.⁵

These reasons have to do with the apparent unavoidability or ontological priority of the claim to comprehension itself. A claim to objective truth about the world (exemplified by science) allows some level of control over objective natural processes, the acknowledgment of a moral claim to rightness produces control over social behavior, and the claim to truthfulness or sincerity disciplines the individual self by holding it accountable for its actions. The fourth validity claim cannot produce a pragmatic claim or a form of control in the way that the other three validity claims can, and nor can it bring forth a corresponding 'world'. But as an ontological condition of communication itself, the claim to comprehensibility does indeed produce: it produces or gives place to meaning in the abstract. Meaning in the abstract is, to return to our starting point, internally related to the process of translation of information in which all semiotic systems are involved. The great philosophical question then becomes whether or not we can say anything further about the production of meaning in the abstract without being drawn into metaphysical claims. Such metaphysical claims would apparently negate the necessary historical condition of possibility accepted by any self-reflective theory capable of comparing itself to other like constructions. I do not propose to pursue this important question here, but I think Habermas (1992b) and many others are right to think it is answerable on the postmetaphysical terrain.

Instead, the important point I wish to emphasize and develop in the remainder of the article concerns the way in which postmodern cultural production draws on interpretive power generated through the claim to comprehensibility and its production of meaning in the abstract. It does so in a way that today poses the general problem of the interpretive event quite clearly. I will limit myself to a focus on marketing and advertising to demonstrate this, but I think further empirical research on media culture will confirm the general arguments here regarding the explanatory value of the concept of interpretive power.

Slogan for a postmodern media aesthetic: ‘the image is understandable by itself’

Postmodern advertising understands the social importance of the subject’s interpretive capacity for this helps to explain marketing’s new power. When the power contained in communicative interaction is harnessed directly to capital via consumerism and postmodern marketing, impressive success for the enterprise and its brand can be achieved. Habermas tends to understand this as the ‘internal colonization’ of lifeworld resources by the systems media of money and power (see Habermas, 1984: Part VIII), which presents his critique of reification. But in the present context, I wish to develop a different understanding of the appropriation of interpretive power that does not rely directly on the theory of reification. My intent, however, is not to suggest that the theory of reification should be replaced or de-emphasized in the analysis of capitalist commodification processes. Rather, it is to explore the relative autonomy of interpretive processes and power from commodification as well as the way these processes and this power can nevertheless also be exploited to serve capital accumulation under postmodern conditions.

The marketing strategy associated with the United Colors of Benetton campaign serves as a fine example of the power drawn from interpretability. Benetton is a multinational sportswear company based in Italy, with 5000 stores around the world and 2 billion euros in annual revenue. The company’s widely known and often discussed campaign began in 1989 when it officially adopted ‘United Colors of Benetton’ as its trademark and logo, and it continues today with greater scope and differentiated form. Its formal approach has subsequently been imitated by other companies and fits into a general trend in postmodern advertising. The United Colors campaign is the first advertising campaign not to feature the company’s products in its advertising. Only the logo is present in a discreet location. The campaign features photographic images of people and/or objects, including photo-journalistic images, which are disseminated through billboard and print media spaces. This focus on image matches the new

importance associated with corporate branding and the integrity of the trademark. Benetton's clothes are a minimal or an unnecessary detail in the logic of the branding exercise.⁶ Benetton has since distinguished its 'campaigns' from its 'product advertising', the latter of which takes a more conventional form, but it is clear that the campaigns are the primary vehicle of its branding.

In order to emphasize the uniqueness of this kind of marketing, it is useful to distinguish it from other forms of advertising. In the history of 20th-century advertising, three broad forms may be distinguished for the purposes of our discussion (the history of advertising, of course, exhibits further differentiation: see, for example, Leiss et al., 1990). Around the turn of the century, early advertising mainly took the form of news reporting. New inventions and products during the early developments of mass manufacturing and technological progress were often big news in and of themselves. Some products could also get a different kind of boost from their association with the new technologies of political or moral administration – what Foucault (1991) calls 'governmentality' – that were being developed as the political became more rationalized (for example, the promotion of the use of soap as a public health issue). Yet much advertising differed little from simple reportage and imitation of news.

Advertising associated with the Fordist era, by contrast, promotes the product as itself desirable as a commodity, as meeting the needs of the consumer. It is not simply reporting the availability of the product but mobilizing desire for it. Modern marketing seeks to create new needs for its products by touting the value of its products to the consumer. It associates the product with desire and becomes engaged in manufacturing new needs and desires in consumers as a necessary counterpart to the manufacturing of the products themselves. Such promotion becomes a 'commodity aesthetics', according to Haug (1986). This form of advertising and marketing corresponds best with the phase of Fordist production in which Taylorist rationalization of assembly-line manufacturing and the resulting vast increases in productivity demanded mass consumption on an equally grand scale. A mass society characterized by significant levels of cultural or consumptive homogeneity is mapped onto a compatible labour process model, a regime of accumulation, and a mode of regulation (see Lipietz, 1992). Fordism develops a relatively high-waged and fully employed (if de-skilled) work force formally regulated by social legislation, credit and Keynesianism. It is socialized through a morality of consumerism. Manufacturing new needs thus becomes part and parcel of manufacturing new products and the overall regulation of the modern production process.

Postmodern advertising indicates a qualitative turn that likewise corresponds to changes in the production and communication processes. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the developmental model of Fordism undergoes

crisis – in large part due to the rigidities of its coordination requirements. The crises of Fordism are partially resolved in a complex shift in which industrial organization, social regulation, production and consumption are subject to a political economy of ‘flexible accumulation’ and undergirded by a complete reorganization of the global financial system in which the financial coordination of capitalism is greatly enhanced (Harvey, 1989: 147, 160ff). Fordist economies of scale are increasingly replaced by ‘just-in-time’ production based instead on economies of scope that are supported by new communication and information technologies. Furthermore, new communications technologies allow production decisions to be communicated through the system at far greater speeds. But the ‘time-space compression’ accompanying flexible accumulation (or ‘post-Fordism’) also then requires far greater access to and circulation of information about production and consumption. The simultaneous expansion of consumer polling, focus groups, consumer surveillance, and a vast proliferation of information and communication service industries, reinforce the increased responsiveness and flexibility in the production process. As Harvey points out, Fordist products were expected to have a half-life of five to seven years, but this has now been substantially reduced in certain sectors, especially software, which has as a whole resulted in much greater concern for rapidly changing styles and the intensification of need inducement. A relatively stable Fordist aesthetic has thus ‘given way to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms’ (Harvey, 1989: 156).

Harvey, who draws from the work of Jameson (1984, 1991) in his analysis, thus understands the culture and aesthetics of postmodernism in terms of their logical correspondence to paradigmatic changes in the political economy of global capitalism (as manifested in the developed West). Under such conditions of flexible accumulation, corporate control over popular taste and culture intensifies but takes a different form to the ‘total administration’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972) corresponding to the mass society of Fordism. Niche marketing, the significant encouragement and empowerment of consumers to develop themselves via individualized product lines, and the pervasive and cynical eroticization of media culture testify to the great attention paid by capitalist enterprise to distinctions between consumers and their motivations to buy.

The most prominent marketing shift associated with post-Fordism, however, is that from product to brand. Advertising and promotion in a competitive marketplace in which greater and greater varieties of products have shorter and shorter half-lives must shift its emphasis from products to brands. The identity and integrity of the corporate brand or trademark that endures is more important than the identity and integrity of products that have far shorter or more ‘flexible’ production runs and hence less need for

public presence. Strategies of branding and defending the brand have thus become central in contemporary advertising (see Klein, 2000). The increased predominance in advertising of image over symbol or text that correlates with this is a complex phenomenon. But it appears to be closely related to the political economy of post-Fordism since images have faster and more flexible communicative power when compared to many other media. Corporate control over popular taste and culture today can hence be described less as ideological than 'iconological' (Mitchell, 1986) or 'spectacular' (Debord, 1994), with the semiotics of image and spectacle predominating in politics just as much as in advertising (see Edelman, 1988; Kellner, 2003). The particularity and relational constitution of the object, which reveals its cognitive value, tends to disappear behind its image – behind a relatively autonomous set of iconologic and symbolic representations and associations.

This disappearance of the product behind its image is just what we observe in Benetton's United Colors campaign. What is also interesting about the details of Benetton's campaigns, however, is the simultaneous appropriation of explicit political and social issues as the main themes of the advertising, whose promotion is centrally associated with the company's own goals. These goals are, in the last analysis, those of selling clothes and generating profits for shareholders, but the company consistently claims to be promoting social justice aims through its activities. The United Colors campaign focuses almost exclusively on images, with supplements of public texts released by the company (commentaries, explanatory press releases, etc.) and an infrastructure of support institutions. Benetton publishes a glossy magazine, *Colors*, which deploys culture-jamming techniques of ironic anti-advertising and critical commentary on social issues, while including conventional advertisements for non-Benetton products. The company sponsors and supports a range of social justice causes and groups. In 1994, it built a communications research centre in Northern Italy called *Fabrica*, which has not only taken over the company's advertising (in 2000) and publishes *Colors*, but also designs campaigns for other organizations including, most prominently, the United Nations and the World Health Organization.⁷ Benetton's United Colors campaign thus indicates the image emphasis of postmodern advertising and its appropriation of symbolic politics for commercial enterprise.

Benetton's United Colors campaign initially featured images of happy, multicultural groups of people, often in poses that indicate friendship or love for each other (kissing, hugs, laughing, handshakes, etc.), which are designed to suggest international peace and harmony, a united world of equals, a 'world without borders'. Sometimes these images belied the actual violent and stubborn political opposition that characterized the normal relations between the groups represented, as in an image of an orthodox Jew and Palestinian being friends together. Such counterfactual

representation could easily be seen as advocating peace and friendship between these long-standing enemies, which in this case encourages a hopeful attitude toward the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The overall idea of this set of images is to suggest that such oppositions and the violence that has often accompanied them could and should be overcome. In this way the campaign draws on the ‘principle of hope’ (Bloch, 1986) present in utopian images and ideas.

It is important to note, however, that Benetton did not suggest nor wish to imply by its campaign that simply buying the company’s clothes would contribute directly to political rapprochement between oppositional groups or actually bring about the happy, multicultural world represented in the campaign. Instead, the company’s representatives’ explanations of the campaign, including, most centrally, CEO Luciano Benetton’s own views on the justification of the campaign, have stated that the idea is to raise social issues to mass consciousness. It is justified in part as a campaign that would get people talking about these issues, issues that may otherwise have remained unknown or peripheral to them. Giroux (1994) therefore argues that Benetton’s United Colors campaign promoted an apolitical egalitarianism under cover of an appeal to international harmony, which was ostensibly about social responsibility, lifestyle and worldview and not so much about selling sweaters.

Following the happy, multicultural, one-world theme, the campaign turned to highly shocking and graphic photo-journalistic images that have caused substantial controversy. Examples of these photo-journalistic images (what Goldman and Papson would call hyperreal) include a newborn baby with placenta and blood, a street scene of wreckage which was the result of a car bomb, a Bosnian soldier’s bloody clothes, a dying AIDS patient and

FIGURE 1



© Copyright 2003 Benetton Group S.p.A. – Photo: James Mollison.

FIGURE 2



© Copyright 2003 Benetton Group S.p.A. – Photo: Oliviero Toscani.

FIGURE 3



© Copyright 1989 Benetton Group S.p.A. – Photo: Oliviero Toscani.

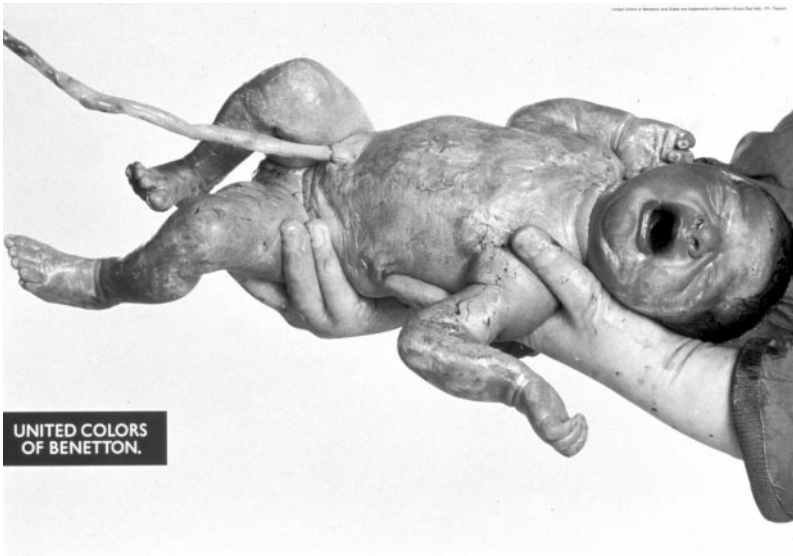
FIGURE 4

© Copyright 1989 Benetton Group S.p.A. – Photo: Oliviero Toscani.

FIGURE 5

© Copyright 1994 Benetton Group S.p.A. – Photo: Oliviero Toscani.

FIGURE 6



© Copyright 1991 Benetton Group S.p.A. – Photo: Oliviero Toscani.

his family, actual death row inmates, which followed the earlier racially coded ads such as an apparently white baby being nursed by a black woman, and white and black wrists handcuffed together. Many of these images had strong photo-realist authenticity and Benetton later provided subject matter details which underlined their authentic nature. Like the multicultural ‘one world’ images, none of these photo-journalistic images featured captions; only Benetton’s logo is present at a discreet location. The shock value of the images was certainly realized in the storms of protest over some of them – for example, the black woman nursing the apparently white baby was banned in the United States for its overt reference to the history of slavery and Benetton was sued by a victims’ group over the use of the death row images. It may very well be that such shock tactics have become more necessary in order to reach today’s jaded consumers, who are constantly inundated with advertising messages. But again, as with the multicultural images, Benetton’s consistent response to these controversies is to maintain that the campaign is serving – not exploiting – social justice by making people aware of the social issues. Benetton thus pursues a strategy of constructing and maintaining an image of social responsibility for the company through an implicit reliance on the interpretive ability of its customers and anyone encountering the campaign. For some commentators, Benetton’s marketing, along with other such social consciousness-raising advertising, is useful for bringing social issues

to public awareness (Canclini, 2001; Costera Meijer, 1998; Kraidy and Goeddertz, 2003), even if such communication 'will always be limited by the advertisement's inherent bias: the sales pitch' (Tinic, 1997: 23). This may be the case notwithstanding sometimes significant mass media opposition to Benetton's campaign, such as that of the US prestige press, which, in its discourse on the 'We on Death Row' campaign, attempted to frame the company as a 'European' other to American values and thus to suppress public debate over capital punishment in America (Kraidy and Goeddertz, 2003).

Giroux sees Benetton's campaign, however, as an appropriation of difference 'stripped of all social and political antagonisms'. It involved a double strategy of decontextualizing or dehistoricizing the images coupled with a recontextualization of the images that does not allow the viewer to situate them historically or culturally but instead encourages them to 'simply see horror and shock without critically responding to it' (1994: 15, 17–18). In other words, there is a pedagogy going on in the advertising that reduces social issues to matters of perception so that, following Ewen (1988), image change is substituted for social change. Politics is not being avoided or denied here, it is instead appropriated as spectacle via the immediacy of the image.

There is an interesting quote from Luciano Benetton that helps to connect this dehistoricized appropriation of politics with my theme of interpretability:

Many people have asked why we didn't include a text that would explain the image. But we preferred not to because we think the image is understandable by itself. (Benetton, quoted in Giroux, 1994: 16)

Benetton implies that there is an intended reading that the viewer is invited to adopt, and the context of this quote confirms this. But many interpretations of the images were, of course, possible – they generated diverse interpretations, which Benetton happily acknowledges and indeed approves of, since a diversity of views is something he supports. For Giroux, however, such an approach merely attempts 'to render ideology innocent' (1994: 17), for interpretation always occurs in a context in which certain interpretations will be privileged over others. That is, the social conditioning of our perceptual faculties occurs within an ideological context in which systematic distortions and hegemonic interpretations of reality infuse daily life, which entails that this context will directly condition our faculties and hence our interpretations. Thus, in a society in which systematic racism exists, one cannot simply expect from an image that a social justice perspective will prevail over, say, a racist one. This introduces significant ambiguity into Benetton's ads. For example, will anyone really think the white baby is or could be the black woman's baby, or will the image uncritically recall slavery and colonialism? Will the black

hand handcuffed to the white hand associate law and justice with the former, or will it reaffirm crime as essentially a racialized problem? One is reminded of Sontag's assessment of the political interpretation of images, with or without a caption:

What the moralists are demanding from a photograph is that it should do what no photograph can ever do – speak. The caption is the missing voice, and it is expected to speak for truth. But even an entirely accurate caption is only one interpretation, necessarily a limiting one, of the photograph to which it is attached. (1977: 108–9)

But beyond this I want to emphasize the importance of the power of interpretation itself that is mobilized here. On the face of it, Benetton's statement that 'the image is understandable by itself' is explicitly linked to a social justice position that Benetton wishes to encourage – that is, the insistence that it is about promoting not exploiting social justice. We may certainly consider this a rather cynical claim given Benetton's own post-Fordist production practices of outsourcing, job insecurity and reliance on the cheap labour of disadvantaged peoples in the world. But what is key here is the centrality of interpretive power to the success of the campaign strategy. One may speculate that in the bigger picture, for Benetton, it really matters little how consumers interpret the images, just as long as they engage with them, and, especially, engage in argument with their friends, family, co-workers, etc. over the meaning of the images and the campaign itself. The shock value and controversy generated by the insertion of disturbing yet ambiguous images into public space is certainly enough to stimulate such interpretive activity. It is quite possible that this generation of interpretive activity, more than anything else, propelled the great rise of the Benetton profile during the 1990s and made its logo one of the most widely recognized in the world today.

Postmodern advertising, which focuses not on the product but on the system of signs with which the product may only be associated quite indirectly, if at all, requires significant levels of interpretive power generated by communicative interaction in itself. In this way we can comprehend more fully the ambiguity embodied in the Benetton campaign, which is found in far less controversial form in the ambiguity, obscurity or hypersignified nature of postmodern advertising in general. Ambiguity, which is known to be a strength in modern ideologies, is here made into an explicit form of the content. In modern political ideologies, ambiguity functions as an ideological strength because it allows flexibility for the ideologist (whether the ideologist sees it this way is irrelevant). For example, in the 17th-century political theory of John Locke, one can interpret the meaning of human nature in one way in order to justify including the whole population in the constitution of civil society and in another way in order to justify excluding most of them (the property-less)

from political participation (Macpherson, 1962). The ambiguity of the images in Benetton's campaign is likewise their ideological strength, but not because it deploys the textual strategy of a political ideology like Locke's. The campaign is not putting forth an explicit ideological point of view, or even trying to manipulate an audience in the way modern advertising constructs desire for the product. This is because it is exploiting interpretive power for the sake of interpretability itself. As Benetton says, 'we think the image is understandable by itself': understandable, certainly, but only as meaning in the abstract or what semioticians call a floating signifier, as signification 'in itself' and hence not as potentially fully comprehensible in the cognitive sense.

It is this power that has been freed up to an unprecedented extent in supposedly 'post-ideological' postmodernity. Drawing on this power – relying on it more – in the interests of consumerism is not inconsistent with commodification processes. But, compared to modern advertising under Fordism, it requires qualitatively increased interpretive action by consumers that activates a cognitive process that cannot occur without an orientation toward the raising and redeeming of validity claims through language and communicative interaction. Gone is the dominance of the strict political requirement of Fordist modernity that forced the consumer to conform, even while the proliferation of apparent choices continues to exploit seduction and manipulation of desire. Replacing it is a groundless freedom that constantly requires interpretive power in order to be actualized.

Conclusion

Thus it seems not the case that the 'age of hypersignification' necessarily ushers in a deep crisis of meaning (Goldman and Papsen, 1994: 48), since consumers are invited and indeed required to do much more interpretive work with advertising today than they have ever had to do in the past. From a perspective that recognizes the key cognitive moment associated with the interpretive event, the age of hypersignification and its dominant image-based mediations certainly present problems. But since, according to Habermas, reaching mutual understanding in language requires an orientation toward validity claims, every mass-mediated signification is potentially subject to critical reflection by consumers. Such critical reflection is no longer simply excluded or suppressed by the aesthetic distractions manufactured by the culture industry. With the shift to the form of advertising analyzed here, however, autonomous – as opposed to more strictly manipulative – interpretive activity is emphasized more in and through such manipulation, which consequently de-emphasizes mere aesthetic distraction. Therefore, notwithstanding the hyperreality of a society domin-

ated by visual culture, the critical orientation inherent in autonomous interpretive activity is also brought closer to the surface in the cognitive requirements of understanding through continual mediation in language. Such increased reliance on consumers' interpretive capacities, even in postmodern experience, is accompanied by an increased orientation toward the achievement of valid interpretations and the ability to confirm and maintain such interpretations. The success of the advertising in our example that treats social justice seriously will require a close relationship to the achievement of validity – rather than to the manipulation of desire or eroticism – for just this reason. The contradiction in such cultural forms is not the contradiction of Fordist modernism, namely, the false promise of substitute gratification 'that the diner must be satisfied with the menu' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 139). If there is a contradiction, it would instead be between the orientation toward recognizing validity and the groundlessness of abstract meaning immanent to such advertising forms. Opposition or resistance to postmodern consumerism could thus find strength by publicly pressing the claims to validity required for the exploitation of the elevated levels of interpretive power.

Notes

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1. Distinguishing the communicability of the animal from the human is a very complex question that cannot be addressed here. However, I do not wish to imply by my statement concerning the immediacy of instinctual experience that non-human life is determined or characterized completely by genetic or instinctual behavior. It is not by any means. Social and cultural communication via mimesis, for example, is a common feature of much non-human animal life. By saying that immediacy in communication can only be a feature of pre-symbolic interaction, I am simply preparing the subsequent argument on the difference in interpretive level that symbols entail.

2. Communicative actors using a fully differentiated natural language take up relations:

... to something in the objective world (as the totality of entities about which true statements are possible); or to something in the social world (as the totality of legitimately regulated interpersonal relations); or to something in the subjective world (as the totality of experiences to which a speaker has privileged access and which he can express before a public). (Habermas, 1987: 120)

3. My thanks to Stephan Meyer for emphasizing the importance of Habermas's fourth validity claim to me in our discussions at the School of Criticism and Theory, Cornell University, 2001.

4. For this reason, Zinkin's argument that the claim to intelligibility ought to be considered in the same way as the other validity claims and that it is a claim that

can in fact be redeemed within communication (1998: 459) cannot be advanced. She has slipped into metaphysics, which is intimated in her conclusion: 'If language is not the *medium* . . . [of] truth, truthfulness and rightness . . . then rationality cannot be intrinsic to the use of language, but must be outside of and contingent to it' (1998: 468).

5. Although the lifeworld thus 'remains indeterminate', for Habermas, it is not then understood as radically indeterminate in the way post-structuralism or deconstruction would view the lifeworld. For a detailed analysis of Habermas's view of the lifeworld, which compares it with deconstruction's approach in the context of a discussion of democratic theory, see Morris (2001b).

6. See Klein (2000) for a detailed treatment of the new corporate focus on branding and the kinds of resistance emerging to this. See also (Morris, 2001a).

7. Fabrica also supports cinema production from the East and the South. It is consequently a unique corporate advertising centre that, according to its own description, offers grants to bring in young artists from around the world 'to participate in a range of communication activities, in cinema or graphics, design or music, as part of *Colors Magazine*, or within new media or photography'. A revealing mass media indication of the success of Benetton's strategy to associate its image with social justice and multiculturalism is found in a recent article on multiculturalism in Canada's leading national newspaper. The centerpiece article of two full pages featured a series of photographs of immigrant business frontages on the emblematic multicultural street in Toronto (Bloor St) that inexplicably concludes with the frontage of the United Colors of Benetton store (*The Globe and Mail* 30 June 2003: A8–A9).

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