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Preface

Growing up in a working-class neighborhood in Providence, Rhode Island, provided me with a particular orientation to the relationship between popular culture and schooling. Popular culture was where the action was—it marked out a territory where pleasure, knowledge, and desire circulated in close proximity to the life of the streets. There was always something forbidden about this culture, with its comics, pinball machines, restricted codes, visual excesses, and overly masculine orientation.

My friends and I collected and traded comic books, learned about desire through the rock and roll of Little Richard and Bill Haley and the Comets, and drank to the blues of Fats Domino. We hated Pat Boone and didn't know the suburbs even existed. We felt rather than knew what was really useful knowledge. And we talked, danced, and lost ourselves in a street culture that never stopped moving. Then we went to school.

Something stopped us in school. For me, it was like being sent to a strange planet. Teaching was exclusively centered on obscure books and the culture of print. Desire was mainly a male prerogative reserved for sports during recess time. The language we learned and had to speak was different, strange, and unusually verbose. Bodily and intellectual memories disappeared for working-class kids in this school. We were on a different train, one oriented toward a cheap imitation of the knowledge of high culture. Latin, Western civilization, math, spelling, social studies, and religion were given to us through the force-feeding methods that characterized public schools for kids who had little hope of leaving their

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Consuming Social Change: The United Colors of Benetton¹

PROMOTIONAL CULTURE IN THE POSTMODERN AGE

Diversity is good. . . . your culture (whoever you are) is as important
as our culture (whoever we are).

—Colors, Fall–Winter 1991

In spite of the alleged collapse of postmodernism as yet another theoretical fashion, the politics of representation that has occupied the center of its analysis has become indispensable for understanding how politics reaches into everyday life to mobilize particular lived experiences, desires, and forms of agency. While certain versions of postmodernism may have overestimated the degree to which the boundaries between images and reality have become blurred, the postmodernist approach does not underestimate the expanding power of representations, texts, and images in producing identities and shaping the relationship between the self and society in an increasingly commodified world.² If postmodern theory used concepts such as the decentered subject or plural identities to analyze the emergence of broader cultural and social changes, mass-market advertisers have seized upon the cultural logic of postmodernism to integrate politics and difference with the stylized world of aesthetics and consump-

tion.³ Situated in a vortex of globally produced images and representations, consumer postmodernism produces meanings mediated through claims to truth represented in images that circulate in an electronic, informational hyperspace which disassociates itself from history, context, and struggle. Images that shocked people in the past have become what David Bailey and Stuart Hall call "the most effective way of selling commodities today."⁴

There is a certain irony in the fact that while many social theorists claim that postmodernism is dead, mass advertisers have seized upon the postmodern condition with its celebration of images, its proliferation of differences, and its fragmented notion of the subject to create pedagogical practices that offer a sense of unity amid a world increasingly devoid of any substantive discourse of community and solidarity. It is through these concerted and often pernicious efforts to rearticulate the relationship among difference, human agency, and community that mass advertising increasingly succeeds in its promotional mission: to disguise the political nature of everyday life and appropriate the vulnerable new terrain of insurgent differences in the interests of a crass consumerism.

But there is more at stake here than advertising and commerce combining in the postmodern age to commodify through the ritualization of fashion that which has previously escaped its reach. More important, mass advertising has become the site of a representational politics that powerfully challenges our understanding of what constitutes pedagogy, the sites in which it functions, and who speaks under what conditions through its authorizing agency. With the emergence of advertising as a global enterprise, we are witnessing a new form of violence against the public. By this I do not mean simply the intrusion of violence into designated public spheres as much as I am suggesting what Andrew Payne and Tom Taylor have referred to as a "public whose essential predicate would be violence."⁵ At the core of this violence are constituting principles which accentuate individualism and difference as central elements of the marketplace. Underlying this violence of the public is a notion of the social bereft of ethics, social justice, and any viable conception of democratic public cultures. Put another way, mass advertising and its underlying corporate interests represent a new stage in an effort to abstract the notion of the public from the language of ethics, history, and democratic community.⁶

The rearticulation and new intersection of advertising and commerce, on the one hand, and politics and representational pedagogy, on the other, can be seen in the emergence of Benetton as one of the leading manufacturers and retailers of contemporary clothing. Benetton is important not only because of its marketing success, but also because it

has taken a bold stance in attempting to use advertising as a forum to address highly charged social and political issues. Through its public statements and advertising campaigns, Benetton has brought a dangerously new dimension to corporate appropriation as a staple of postmodern aesthetics. Inviting the penetration of aesthetics into everyday life, Benetton has utilized less deterministic and more flexible approaches to design, technology, and styling. Such postmodern approaches to marketing and layout privilege contingency, plurality, and the poetics of the photographic image in an attempt to rewrite the relationship among aesthetics, commerce, and politics. Instead of depoliticizing or erasing images that vividly, and in some cases shockingly, depict social and political events, Benetton has attempted to redefine the link between commerce and politics by emphasizing both the politics of representation and the representation of politics. In the first instance, Benetton has appropriated for its advertising campaign actual news photos of social events that portray various calamities of our time. These include pictures of a duck covered with thick oil, a bloodied mafia murder victim, depictions of child labor, and a terrorist car bombing. As part of a representation of politics, Benetton struggles to reposition itself less as a producer of commodities and market retailer than as a corporate voice for a particular definition of public morality, consensus, coherence, and community. This has been more recently revealed in an advertising campaign which depicts Senator Luciano Benetton posing nude with an accompanying text urging people of wealth to give away their "old" clothes to charity. Benetton justifies the ad by arguing that "business has to go on for everybody. Rich people should buy new stuff and be pleased that others can profit from [their old clothes]."⁷ Justice in this case is appropriated in order both to regulate the production of consumerism and to legitimate it.

Within Benetton's worldview, the relationship among identity formation, commerce, pedagogy, and politics is being reworked. That is, such a relationship is now used to highlight how pedagogy can be conscripted into the service of relations of identity and difference that promote an apolitical egalitarianism veiled in an appeal to international harmony. The result is that Benetton offers itself as the promotional mediator of a version of the social that abstracts ethics from a history informed by diverse forms of resistance and collective struggle. Social consciousness and activism in this worldview are about purchasing merchandise, not changing oppressive relations of power.

In what follows, I want to provide a brief introduction to the history of Benetton's advertising campaign. Second, I want to analyze the structural relations and ideological rationale that inform the emergence of Benetton as a major distributor of clothing in the post-Fordist age and as a corporate

advocate for a particular approach to multiculturalism and diversity. Third, I will examine in some detail what I will call Benetton's pedagogy of representation, focusing on its claim to realism and its politics of (de)contextualism. In addition, I will attempt to deconstruct three of its more politically charged photojournalistic advertisements. In conclusion, I will attempt to analyze briefly how cultural workers might challenge the implications of Benetton's pedagogy and cultural politics.

SMALL BEGINNINGS AND GLOBAL CONTROVERSIES

All over the world Benetton stands for colorful sportswear, multiculturalism, world peace, racial harmony, and now, a progressive approach toward serious social issues.

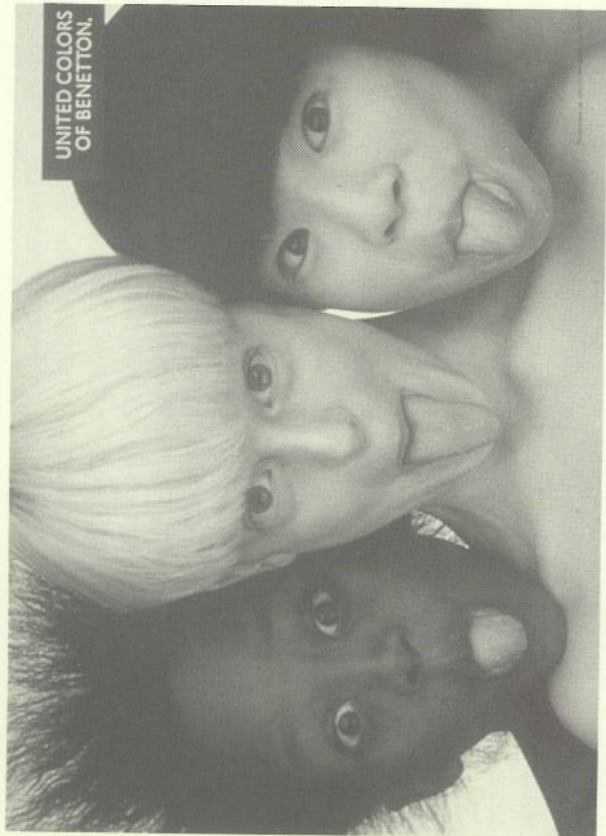
—Benetton⁸

In 1965, Luciano Benetton and three siblings established a small business, Fratelli Benetton, near Treviso, Italy. Originally designed to produce colorful sweaters, the business expanded into a full range of personal apparel and eventually developed into a two billion dollar fashion empire producing eighty million pieces of clothing a year for seven thousand franchise stores in over one hundred countries.

Benetton's advertising campaign over the last decade has been instrumental in its success in the fashion world. The advertising campaign is important not merely as a means of assessing Benetton commercial success in extending its name recognition, it is crucial for understanding how the philosophy of the company has attempted to reinscribe its image within a broader set of political and cultural concerns. In 1984, Benetton hired Oliviero Toscani, an award-winning photographer, to head its advertising campaign. Given a free hand with the advertising budget, Toscani focused initially on culturally diverse young people dressed in Benetton attire and engaged in a variety of seemingly aimless and playful acts. Linking the colors of Benetton clothes to the diverse "colors" of their customers from all over the world, Toscani attempted to use the themes of racial harmony and world peace to register such differences within a wider unifying articulation. In 1985, Toscani adopted The United Colors of Benetton as a recurring trademark of the Benetton ideology. In 1991, Toscani initiated a publicity campaign that removed Benetton merchandise from the firm's advertising, and started using its eighty million dollar global ad budget to publish controversial and disturbing photographs in magazines and on billboards. Taking full control of the ad blitz, Toscani

personally photographed many of the shots that dominated the 1991 Benetton campaign. These included a number of compelling images that created a provocative effect: variously colored, blown-up condoms floating in the air, a nun kissing a priest on the lips, a row of test tubes filled with blood, and a newborn baby girl covered in blood and still attached to her umbilical cord. In 1992 Toscani embarked on his most dramatic effort to combine high fashion and politics in the service of promoting the Benetton name. He selected a series of highly charged, photojournalistic images referencing, among other things, the AIDS crisis, environmental disaster, political violence, war, exile, and natural catastrophe. These appeared in various journals and magazines as well as on billboards without written text except for the conspicuous insertion of the green and white United Colors of Benetton logo located in the margins of the photograph.

Benetton's shift in advertising strategy between 1984 and 1991 needs to be considered as part of a wider politics and pedagogy of representation. The earlier photographs representing children of diverse races and colors dressed in Benetton clothing have what Michael Stevens calls a "netherworld quality that gives the viewers the impression they're glimpsing some fashionable heaven."⁹ Depicted in these photographs of children hugging and holding hands is a portrayal of racial harmony and difference that appears both banal and sterile. The exaggerated precision of the models and the primary colors used in the advertisements render racial unity as a purely aesthetic category while eliminating racial conflict completely in this two-dimensional world of make-believe. Within these ad campaigns, race and ethnicity are both accentuated and fixed. According to Les Back and Vibeke Quaade, "Throughout the campaigns, human difference is reduced to a set of simplified caricatures which are presented as archetypes. In fact, what we find in Benetton advertising is a parade of racial essences. Thus, the 'whites' have blue eyes and blond hair, the 'blacks' are 'Negroid,' and the 'Orientals' are likewise locked in a crass image of 'racial' traits."¹⁰ In addition, the "colorful" images in the early phase of the United Colors campaign appear almost too comfortable, and seem at odds with a world marked by political, economic, and cultural conflict. In the early ads racial differences are accentuated, but are linked primarily to the dynamics of consumption and largely subordinated to the logic of the marketplace and commerce. But at the same time, the harmony and consensus implied in these ads often mock concrete racial, social, and cultural differences as they are constituted amid hierarchical relations of struggle, power, and authority. Benetton's corporate image in this case seems strangely at odds with its own market research, which



United Colors of Benetton 1991 Spring/Summer advertising campaign.

PHOTO: O. TOSCANI

indicated that its "target customers—18–34 year old women—are more socially active and aware than any generation that precedes them."¹¹

The switch in the ad campaign to controversial photojournalistic images reflects an attempt on the part of Benetton to redefine its corporate image. In order to define itself as a company concerned with social change, Benetton suspended its use of upscale representations in its mass advertising campaign, especially in a world where, as Carol Squires writes, "denial in the service of upbeat consumerism is no longer a workable strategy as we are continually overwhelmed by disturbing and even cataclysmic events."¹² In a postmodern world caught in the disruptive forces of nationalism, famine, violence, and war, such representations linked Benetton's image less to the imperatives of racial harmony than to the forces of cultural uniformity and yuppie colonization. Moreover, Benetton's move away from an appeal to utility to one of social responsibility provides an object lesson in how promotional culture increasingly uses pedagogical practices to shift its emphasis from selling a product to selling an image of corporate responsibility.¹³ Given the increase in sales, profits, and the widespread publicity Benetton has received, the campaign appears to have worked wonders.

The response to the campaign inaugurated in 1991 was immediate. Benetton was both condemned for its appropriation of serious issues to sell goods and praised for incorporating urgent social concerns into its advertising. In many cases, the Benetton ads were either banned from particular countries or refused by specific magazines. One of the most controversial ads portrayed AIDS patient David Kirby surrounded by his family shortly before he died. The Kirby ad became the subject of heated debate among various groups in several countries. In spite of the criticism and perhaps in part owing to it, the company's profits rose 24 percent, to \$132 million worldwide, in 1991. The Benetton name has even infiltrated popular literary culture, with Douglas Coupland coining the phrase "Benetton Youth" in his novel *Shampoo Planet* to refer to global kids whose histories, memories, and experiences began in the Reagan era of greed and conspicuous consumption. *Adweek* reports that because of the success of the Benetton campaign, Toscani has become something of a commercial "star," and has been asked by American Express to develop marketing concepts for them. Benetton's stock is up because of the visibility of the company, and David Roberts, an analyst with Nomura International-London, claims that Benetton's "name recognition is approaching that of Coca-Cola."¹⁴

Benetton's practical response to the controversy has been threefold. First, Benetton and its spokespersons have reacted aggressively within a number of public forums and debates in order to defend the firm's advertising policies by either condemning the criticism as a form of censorship or criticizing other ad companies for producing advertising that merely engages in the most reductionistic forms of pragmatism. Second, it has used the debate to reorder its identity as a corporate force for social responsibility. Third, it has seized upon the controversy itself as a pretext for further marketing of its ideology in the form of books, magazines, talks, interviews, articles, and the use of stars such as Spike Lee to endorse its position in the debate.¹⁵

Benetton has attempted to articulate and defend its position through material found in campaign copy sent to its various stores around the world, particularly the Fall-Winter and Spring-Summer 1992 versions. Moreover, it has attempted to deflect criticism of its ads by allowing selected executives to speak in interviews, the press, and various popular magazines. The three major spokespersons for Benetton have been Luciano Benetton, founder and managing director, Oliviero Toscani, creative director, and Peter Fressola, Benetton's director of communications in North America. All three provide different versions of a similar theme: Benetton is not about selling sweaters but social responsibility, and it is a company that represents less a product than a lifestyle and worldview.

Recently elected as a senator to the Italian Parliament, Luciano Benetton is the principal ideologue in the Benetton apparatus. He is chiefly responsible for defining the structuring principles that guide Benetton as both a corporate entity and an ideological force. His own political beliefs are deeply rooted in the neoliberal language of the free market, privatization, the removal of government from the marketplace, and the advocacy of business principles as the basis for a new social imaginary. Hence, it is not surprising that, in addition to defending the ads for their role in generating public awareness of controversial issues, Luciano Benetton readily admits that the advertising campaign "has a traditional function, . . . to make Benetton known around the world and to introduce the product to consumers."¹⁶ More than any other spokesperson, Luciano Benetton articulates the company's position concerning the relationship between commerce and art and acts as a constant reminder that the bottom line for the company is profit and not social justice.

Peter Fressola, on the other hand, promotes Benetton's ideological position, and claims that the ad campaign does not reflect the company's desire to sell sweaters. He argues, "We're not that stupid. We're doing corporate communication. We're sponsoring these images in order to change people's minds and create compassion around social issues. We think of it as art with a social message."¹⁷ Of course, the question here is, Whose minds does Benetton want to shape? In part, the answer lies in its own advertising material, which states that "various studies have shown that in 1992 consumers are as concerned by what a company stands for as they are about the price/value relationship of that company's product."¹⁸ There is nothing in Fressola's message that challenges the legacy of the corporate use of communications to advance, if only tacitly, "some kind of self-advantaging exchange."¹⁹

On one level logos permeate our everyday world to such a degree that they have become commonplace symbols that blur the line between art, politics, and commodification. As a new form of cultural capital, they distinguish upscale or trendy corporations from less prominent corporate players. But more important, they constitute the borders within which cultural objects and practices are constituted as a form of capital. Logos in this sense do not simply signify goods, they serve as a marker to remind us that there are no public spheres, desires, practices, and needs that can escape being commodified. Logos have become central to a politics of identity in which they provide people with forms of representation in which they can identify themselves and their relationship to others. The political and cultural implications of the use of logos to connect identities to the dictates of corporate ideologies is captured by Susan Willis in her analysis of the Disney logo.

In late twentieth-century America, the cultural capital of corporations has replaced many of the human forms of cultural capital. As we buy, wear, and eat logos, we become the henchmen and admen of the corporations, defining ourselves with respect to the social standing of the various corporations. Some would say that this is a new form of tribalism, that in sporting corporate logos we ritualize and humanize them, we redefine the cultural capital of the corporations in human social terms. I would say that a state where culture is indistinguishable from logo and where the practice of culture risks infringement of private property is a state that values the corporate over the human.²⁰

Benetton's response to such criticisms is either to occupy the moral high ground or to displace the wider political and ideological significance of the logo by making a pragmatic appeal to the results of extensive market research. For example, when questioned about the use of the Benetton logo imprinted on all ad copy and photographs, Fressola, Toscani, and other spokespeople generally reply by evading the question and pointing to the use of such photographs as part of their support for art, controversy, and public dialogue around social issues. But the presence of the logo is no small matter. In light of their market research, which stresses what Raymond Loewy called the need for designer corporate symbols to index visual memory retention, the presence of the Benetton logo partakes of a powerful advertising legacy. It asserts that, regardless of the form it takes, the purpose of advertising is to subordinate all values to the imperatives of profit and commercialization. Loewy's argument, "We want anyone who has seen the logotype, even fleetingly, to never forget it, or at least to forget it slowly," provides a powerful indictment of Benetton's rationale and the claim that Benetton is engaging in a *new* form of corporate communication.²¹ By refusing to disrupt or challenge this haunting and revealing legacy of designer logos, communication in these terms appears to do nothing more than link the commodification of human tragedy with the imperatives of brand recognition while simultaneously asserting the discourse of aesthetic freedom and the moral responsibility of commerce. This is captured in part in a statement that appeared in Benetton's Fall-Winter 1992 advertising campaign literature: "Among the various means available to achieve the brand recognition that every company must have, we at Benetton believe our strategy for communication to be more effective for the company and more useful to society than would be yet another series of ads showing pretty girls wearing pretty clothes."²²

Toscani goes so far as to separate his economic role as the director of advertising from what he calls the process of communication by claiming rather blithely, "I am responsible for the company's communications; I am not really responsible for its economics."²³ Toscani appeals in this case

to the moral high ground, one that he suggests is untarnished by the commercial context that informs the deep structure of his job. Should we assume that Benetton's market research in identifying target audiences has nothing to do with Toscani's creative endeavors? Or perhaps that Toscani has found a way to avoid linking his own corporate success to the rise of Benetton's name recognition in a global marketplace? Toscani is well aware of the relationship between representation and power, as he most certainly is of his own role in giving a new twist to the advertising of commodities as cultural signs in order to promote a particular system of exchange.

POST-FORDISM AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

Capital has fallen in love with difference; advertising thrives on selling us things that will enhance our uniqueness and individuality. . . . From World Music to exotic holidays in Third-World locations, ethnic TV dinners to Peruvian knitted hats, cultural difference sells.

—Martin Davidson, *The Consumerist Manifesto*

In the world of international capital, difference is a contentious and paradoxical concept. On the one hand, as individuals increasingly position themselves within and across a variety of identities, needs, and lifestyles, capital seizes upon such differences in order to create new markets and products. Ideas that hold the promise of producing social criticism are insinuated into products in an attempt to subordinate the dynamics of social struggle to the production of new lifestyles. On the other hand, difference is also a dangerous marker of those historical, political, social, and cultural borderlands where people who are considered the "Other" are often policed, excluded, and oppressed. Between the dynamics of commodification and those of resistance, difference becomes a site of conflict and struggle over bodies, desires, land, labor, and the distribution of resources. It is within the space between conflict and commercial appeal that difference carries with it the legacy of possible disruption and political struggle as well as the possibility for colonizing diverse markets. Within the logic of restructured global capital markets, cultural differences have to be both acknowledged and depoliticized in order to be contained. In a world riddled with conflicts over cultural, ethnic, and racial differences, Benetton defines difference in categorical rather than relational terms and in doing so accentuates a warmed-up diet of liberal pluralism and harmonious consensus.

Central to Benetton's celebration of cultural differences are the dynamics of economic restructuring and the company's own rise from a local business venture to a global marketing conglomerate. Benetton's commercial success and the ideological legitimization upon which it constructs its United Colors of Benetton worldview derive, in part, from its aggressive adaptation to the shifting economic and cultural circumstances of what has been called post-Fordism.

Although post-Fordism is not an unproblematic term for designating the changes that have taken place in manufacturing and retailing in advanced industrial countries since 1950, it does focus attention on a number of economic and ideological tendencies that alert us to the need for new descriptions and analyses of what Stuart Hall calls the "shifting social and technical landscapes of modern industrial production regimes,"²⁴ which are refiguring the relationship between capital and everyday life. Hall has succinctly described some of the most salient characteristics of post-Fordism:

"Post-Fordism" is a [broad] term, suggesting a whole new epoch distinct from the era of mass production. . . . it covers at least some of the following characteristics: a shift to the new information "technologies"; more flexible, decentralized forms of labor process and work organization; decline of the old manufacturing base and the growth of the "sunrise" computer-based industries; the hiving off or contracting out of functions and services; a greater emphasis on choice and product differentiation, on marketing, packaging, and design, on the "targeting" of consumers by lifestyle, taste, and culture rather than by the categories of social class; a decline in the proportion of the skilled, male, manual working class, the rise of the service and white-collar classes and the "feminization" of the work force; an economy dominated by the multinationals, with their new international division of labor and their greater autonomy from nation-state control; and the "globalization" of the new financial markets, linked by the communications revolution.²⁵

Capitalizing on global shifts in the order of economic and cultural life, Benetton has seized upon post-Fordist production techniques and methods of retailing that integrate various aspects of production, design, distribution, and a flexible labor force into a single coordinated system. With great skill and ingenuity, Benetton uses its computerized planning systems, flexible production technology, and marketing resources to both forecast and respond immediately to consumer demands from all over the world. Once consumer orders from various Benetton retailers are tallied at the end of the day, they are sent to a centralized computer system that allows

the orders to be filled within days. Benetton's concern with difference is in part rooted in the hard realities of a global market and its need to serve various consumer needs. But difference is more than just a feature of commerce, it is also about social movements, collective memories of resistance, and the struggle on the part of subordinate groups to reclaim their histories and collective voices. In response to the latter, Benetton has developed a representational politics in the service of a corporate narrative whose purpose is to harness difference as part of an ideology of promotion and political containment.

In this case, Benetton's post-Fordist economic policies are underwritten by a neoconservative political philosophy that supports minimum state intervention in the world of commerce, accentuates privatization in the form of subcontracting, wages a full-fledged assault on unionized labor, and dramatically expands the service sector. While preaching the gospel of social responsibility, Benetton has become a "corporate model" for new post-Fordist production techniques in which workers are increasingly forced to take jobs with less security, fewer benefits, and lower wages. In the new world of subcontracting, as Clare Ansberry writes, more and more "office and factory employees are getting transplanted overnight to a temporary or subcontracting nether world [in order] to save the mother company paperwork and cost."²⁶

This assault on workers is coupled with a call for less state regulation of business. As a senator in the Italian Parliament, Luciano Benetton has made it clear that he would promote a "lesser State presence in the economy,"²⁷ and apply the logic of business to the larger world of politics. Within this scenario, Benetton's discourse of social justice appears transparently cynical next to its conglomerate-building management practices, increasing use of temporary workers at the expense of a full-time, unionized workforce, and aggressive attempts to subordinate all aspects of political and cultural discourse to the logic of capital and commerce.²⁸

The economic mandates of Benetton's post-Fordism are informed by an underlying ideological imperative: the need to contain potentially antagonistic cultural differences and an insurgent multiculturalism through a representational politics that combines pluralism with a depoliticized appeal to world harmony and peace. This becomes more clear by recognizing that the politics of difference à la Benetton intersects diverse vectors of representation. Economically, the company's post-Fordist organizational structure acknowledges cultural difference as a vehicle for expanding its range of markets and goods; diversity in the commercial sense entails a move away from standardized markets and the intrusion of business into the postmodern world of plural identities. The representation of difference becomes a crucial component in a market-driven

attempt to expand production of a variety of apparel for vastly different individuals, groups, and markets. Benetton's corporate ideology, therefore, bespeaks the need to construct representations which affirm differences at the same time they deny their radical possibilities within a corporate ideology that speaks to global concerns. Difference in this sense poses the postmodern problem of maintaining the particularity of diverse groups while simultaneously unifying such differences within Benetton's concept of a "world without borders."

Benetton addresses this problem in both pedagogical and political terms. Pedagogically, it takes up the issue of difference through representations based in the conventions of fashion, style, and spectacle. Adapting its widely circulated magazine *Colors* to an MTV format, it uses the journal to focus on transnational topics such as music, sex, birth control, and a wide range of issues that incorporate popular culture while simultaneously depoliticizing it. Popular culture, in this case, becomes the pedagogical vehicle through which Benetton addresses the everyday concerns of youth while at the same time blurring the lines between popular cultures of resistance and the culture of commerce and commercialization. Inter-spersed amid commentaries on music, pizza, national styles, condoms, rock stars, and the biographies of various Benetton executives, *Colors* parades young people from various racial and ethnic groups wearing Benetton apparel. In this context, difference is stripped of all social and political antagonisms and becomes a commercial symbol for what is youthfully chic, hip, and fashionable. At the same time, *Colors* appears to take its cue from the many concerns that inform the daily lives of teenagers all over the industrialized world.

But *Colors* does more than signify the commodification of popular culture, it also signifies Benetton's attempt to both rewrite the content of ads and blur the boundaries and cultural codes that structure their very forms. Within this context, the distinction between "the news," advertising, mass communication, public events, editorials, and feature stories breaks down. Subordinated to the logic of the spectacle, the selling of fantasies, and the pleasures of buying, the distinctions between these genres disappear. Back and Quade's analysis of *Colors* is worth quoting at length:

The paper constantly crosses the line between forms of mass communication, provides commodity information (adverts) and news information ("the news"), but takes on the usual form of a newspaper, with editorial and feature stories. Its format is that of the non-tabloid morning paper, divided into eight sections dealing with familiar and newsworthy global problems, including waste disposal, North-South inequality, and the plight of refugees and immigrants. It also includes

more style-oriented issues like music, hairstyles and sub-cultures. Benetton turn [sic] the usual relationship between advertising and news media inside out. Unlike conventional newspapers, where advertising is carried as an income-generated appendix to the news, *Colors* uses its news as Benetton's advertising. The news stories are edited with the philosophy of the paper, which is, in turn, associated with the brand quality of its products.²⁹

Politically, Benetton develops a strategy of containment through advertising practices using journalistic photos that address consumers through stylized representations whose structuring principles are shock, sensationalism, and voyeurism. In these images, Benetton's motives have less to do with selling particular products than with offering the company's publicity mechanisms to diverse cultures as a unifying discourse for solving the great number of social problems that threaten to uproot difference from the discourses of harmony, consensus, and fashion. In substituting the "manufactured" studio shot for the hyperrealism of photodocumentary images, Benetton collapses the boundaries between the lurid fantasies that promote consumption and those visions that compel social responsibility.

REPRESENTATIONS OF HOPELESSNESS

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.

—Luciano Benetton

I think to die is to die. This is a human situation, a human condition. . . . But we know this death happened. This is the real thing, and the more real the thing is, the less people want to see it. It's always intrigued me why fake has been accepted and reality has been rejected. At Benetton, we are trying to create an awareness of issues. AIDS is one of today's major modern problems in the world, so I think we have to show something about it.

—Oliviero Toscani³⁰

In defense of the commercial use of sensational, journalistic photographs which include the aforementioned dying AIDS patient, a terrorist car bombing, and a black soldier with a gun strapped over his shoulder holding part of the skeletal remains of another human being, Benetton's spokespeople combine an assertion of universal values and experiences with the politics of realism. Arguing that such images serve as a vehicle

for social change by calling attention to the real world, Benetton suggests that its advertising campaign is informed by a representational politics in which the "truth" of such images is guaranteed by their purchase on reality. From this perspective, "shocking" photos register rather than engage an allegedly unmediated notion of the truth. This appeal to the unmediated "truth-effects" of photographic imagery is coupled with a claim to universal truths ("to die is to die") that serve to deny the historical, social, and political specificity of particular events. Ideologically, this suggests that the value of Benetton's photos resides in their self-referentiality, that is, their ability to reflect both the unique vision of the sponsor and their validation of a certain construction of reality. Suppressed in this discourse is an acknowledgment that the meaning of such photos resides in their functions within particular contexts.

Before discussing specific examples from Benetton's advertising campaign, I want to comment briefly on some of the structuring devices at work in the company's use of photojournalistic images. All of Benetton's ads depend upon a double movement of decontextualization and recontextualization. To accomplish the former move, the photos militate against a reading in which their context and content are historically and culturally situated. Overdetermined by the immediacy of the logic of the spectacle, Benetton's photos become suspended in what Stewart Ewen has called "memories of style."³¹ That is, by dehistoricizing and decontextualizing the photos, Benetton attempts to render ideology innocent by blurring the conditions of production, circulation, and commodification that present such photos as unproblematically real and true. By denying specificity, Benetton suppresses the history of these images and, in doing so, limits the range of meanings that might be brought into play. At issue here is a denial of how shifting contexts give an image different meanings. Of course, the depoliticization that is at work here is not innocent. By failing to rupture the dominant ideological codes (i.e., racism, colonialism, sexism) that structure what I call Benetton's use of hyperventilating realism (a realism of sensationalism, shock, and spectacle), the ads simply register rather than challenge the dominant social relations reproduced in the photographs.

The viewer is afforded no sense of how the aesthetic of realism works to mask what Abigail Solomon-Godeau calls "the codes and structures which give photographs meaning as well as the historical contingencies (e.g., patriarchal structures which normalize notions of looking) which give such codes salience."³² There is no sense of how the operations of power inform the construction of social problems depicted in the Benetton ads, nor is there any recognition of the diverse struggles of resistance which attempt to engage with such problems. Within this aestheticization

of politics, spectacle foregrounds our fascination with the hyperreal and positions the viewer so as to simply see horror and shock without critically responding to it. Roland Barthes has referred to this form of representation as one that positions the viewer within the "immediacy of translation."³³ According to Barthes, this is a form of representational politics that functions as myth, because "it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves."³⁴ Isolated from historical and social contexts, Benetton's images are stripped of their political possibilities and reduced to a spectacle of fascination and terror that appears primarily to privatize one's response to social events. That is, the form of address both reproduces dominant renderings of the image and translates the possibility of agency to the privatized act of buying goods rather than engaging in forms of self- and social determination. This process and its effects become clear in analyzing one of Benetton's more controversial ads, in which AIDS patient David Kirby is portrayed on his deathbed surrounded by members of his grieving family.

As I noted above, this image involves a double movement. On the one hand, it suppresses the diverse lifestyles, struggles, and realities of individuals in various stages of living with AIDS. In doing so, it reinforces dominant representations of people with AIDS, reproducing what Douglas Crimp, in another context, refers to as "what we have already been told or shown about people with AIDS: that they are ravaged, disfigured, and debilitated by the syndrome [and that] they are generally . . . desperate, but resigned to their inevitable deaths."³⁵ The appeal to an aesthetic of realism does little to disturb the social and ideological force of such inherited dominant representations. On the other hand, by not providing an analysis of representations of AIDS as a *de facto* death sentence, relying instead on the clichés enforced through dominant images and their social effects, the Benetton ad reproduces rather than challenges conventional representations that portray people with AIDS as helpless victims.

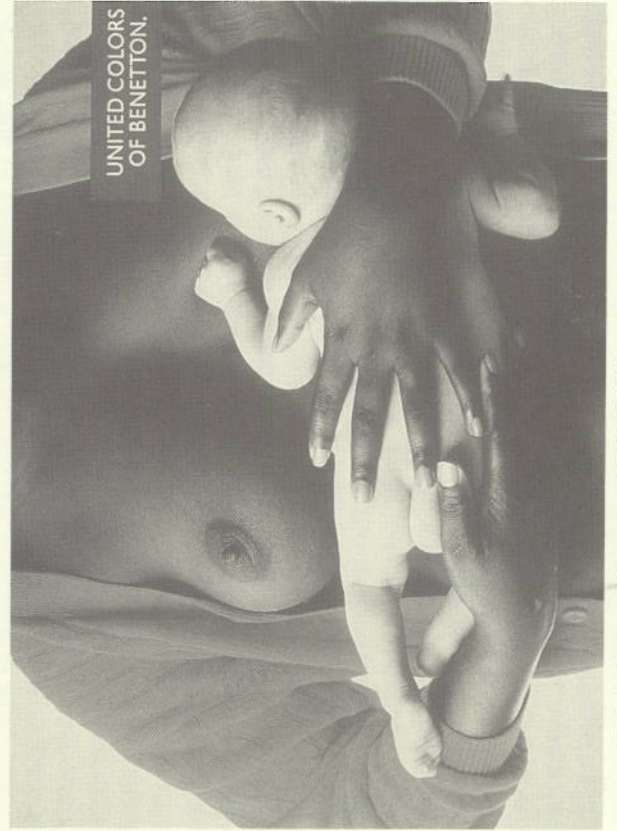
The politics at work in the Benetton photographs is also strikingly revealed in the use of photojournalistic images that are decontextualized from any meaningful historical and social setting and then recontextualized through the addition of the United Colors of Benetton logo. In the latter movement, the logo produces a representational "zone of comfort" confirming a playfulness which allows the viewer to displace any ethical or political understanding of the images contained in the Benetton ads.

The logo serves largely to position the audience within a combination of realism and amusement. Public truths revealed in Benetton's images, regardless of how horrifying or threatening, are offered, according to Dick Hebdige, "as a kind of joke in which the reader is invited to participate (the 'joke' is how low can we go?), but its potential dangers are also pretty clear: today aliens from Mars kidnap joggers, yesterday Auschwitz didn't happen, tomorrow who cares what happens?"³⁶ Of course, the "joke" here is that anything is for sale and social commitment is just another gimmick for selling goods. In this type of representational politics, critical engagement is rendered ineffective by turning the photo and its political referent into an advertisement. If the possibility of social criticism is suggested by the ad, it is quickly dispelled by the insertion of the logo, which suggests that any complicity between the viewer and the event it depicts is merely ironic. The image ultimately references nothing more than a safe space where the logic of the commodity and the marketplace mobilize consumers' desires rather than struggle over social injustices and conflicts. In the case of the AIDS ad, the use of the Benetton logo juxtaposes human suffering and promotional culture so as to invite the viewer to position him- or herself between the playfulness of commodification and an image of apocalypse rendering social change either ironic or unimaginable. This serves less to situate a critical viewer who can mediate social reality and its attendant problems than to subordinate the viewer to the demands and aesthetic of commerce. One consequence of such a position has been captured by Stuart Ewen: "By reducing all social issues to matters of perception, it is on the perceptual level that social issues are addressed. Instead of social change, there is image change. Brief shows of flexibility at the surface mask intransigence at the core."³⁷

In the second instance, recontextualization appeals to an indeterminacy which suggests that the images diffused by Benetton can be negotiated by different individuals in multiple and varied ways. Hence, Benetton's claim that such photos generate diverse interpretations. While such an assumption rightly suggests that viewers always mediate and rewrite images in ways that differ from particular ideologies and histories, when unqualified, it also overlooks how specific contexts privilege some readings over others. In other words, while individuals produce rather than merely receive meanings, the choices they make and the meanings they produce are not free-floating. Such meanings and mediations are, in part, formed within wider social and cultural determinations that propose a range of reading practices that are privileged within power relations of dominance and subordination. The reading of any text cannot be understood independently of the historical and social experiences which construct how audiences interpret other texts. It is this notion of reading

formation that is totally missing from Benetton's defense of its endless images of death, pain, danger, and shock. Tony Bennett is helpful on this issue: "The concept of reading formation . . . is an attempt to think context as a set of discursive and intertextual determinations, operating on material and institutional supports, which bear in upon a text not just externally, from the outside in, but internally, shaping it—in the historically concrete forms in which it is available as a text-to-be-read from the inside out."³⁸

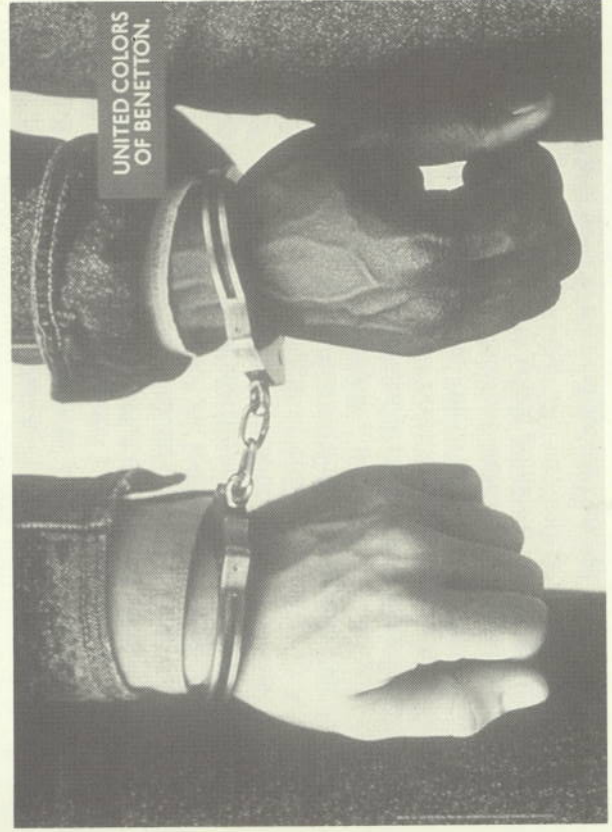
Bennett's point can be illustrated by examining two of Benetton's racially marked ads. The first depicts a black woman and a white baby. The second portrays two hands, one black, one white, handcuffed together. In the former ad, the viewer is presented with the torso of a robust black woman suckling a white baby. A crimson cable-knit cardigan is pulled down over her shoulders to reveal her breasts. Her hands reveal traces of scar tissue, and her nails are trimmed short. This is not a traditional Benetton model. How might one decipher this potent, overdetermined set of signifiers? I say overdetermined in the double sense; first, the racial coding of the image is so overdetermined that it is difficult to imagine that this black woman nursing a long, pale pink baby is the child's mother. Given the legacy of colonialism and racism that informs this image, I



United Colors of Benetton 1989 Fall/Winter advertising campaign.
PHOTO: O. TOSCANI

believe that the photo privileges a range of dominant readings which suggest the ingrained racial stereotype of the black-slave wet nurse or mammy.³⁹ Other than the logo, there are no signifiers in this photo which would threaten or rupture such an imperialist coding. It is precisely the absence of referents related to resistance, rupture, and critique that allows the reader to be perfectly comfortable with such a configuration of race and class while at the same time accepting the image as nothing more than a "playful" ad.

In the second ad, there is a calculated and false equality at work in the image of a black hand and a white hand handcuffed together. Is the viewer in the United States, England, France, or South Africa to believe that the black hand is the signifier of law, order, and justice? Or, given the legacy of white racism in all of these countries, is it more probable that the image, at least at the level of the unconscious, reproduces the racist assumption that crime, turmoil, and lawlessness are essentially a black problem?⁴⁰ Restaging race relations in these terms exploits the racially charged tensions that underlie current racial formations in the Western industrial countries while simultaneously reducing the historical legacy of white supremacy to a representation of mere equality or symmetry. The emotionally charged landscape of race relations, in this instance, becomes



United Colors of Benetton 1989 Fall/Winter advertising campaign.
PHOTO: O. TOSCANI

another example of how social problems become "packaged" in order, as Hal Foster has written, to "reinject the real into our lives as spectacle."⁴¹

CONCLUSION: PEDAGOGY AND THE NEED FOR CRITICAL PUBLIC CULTURES

The new postmodern pedagogy of mass advertising poses a central challenge to the role cultural workers might play in deepening their politics through a broader understanding of how knowledge is produced, identities shaped, and values articulated as a pedagogical practice that takes place in multiple sites outside the traditional institution of schooling. The struggle over meaning is no longer one that can be confined to programs in educational institutions and their curricula. Moreover, the struggle over identity can no longer be seriously considered outside the politics of representation and the new formations of consumption. Culture is increasingly constituted by commerce, and the penetration of commodity culture into every facet of daily life has become the major axis of relations of exchange through which corporations actively produce new, increasingly effective forms of address.

This is not to suggest that the politics of consumption in its various circuits of power constitutes an unadulterated form of domination. Such a view is often more monolithically defensive than dialectical and less interested in understanding the complex process by which people desire, choose, and act in everyday life than in shielding the guardians of high modernism, who have always despised popular culture for its vulgarity and association with the "masses."⁴² What is at stake in the new intersection of commerce, advertising, and consumption is the very definition and survival of critical public cultures. I am referring here to those spheres of daily life where people can debate the meaning and consequences of public truths, inject a notion of moral responsibility into representational practices, and collectively struggle to change dominating relations of power. Central to my argument has been the assumption that these new forms of advertising and consumption do not deny politics, they simply reappropriate it. They enact a politics, according to Hebdige, that "actively creates one version of the social,"⁴³ one that exists in harmony with market ideologies and initiatives. Such a politics offers no resistance to a version of the social as largely, in Bill Moyers's words, a "democracy of images," a public media extravaganza in which politics is defined largely through the "consuming of images."⁴⁴

Cultural workers need to reformulate the concept of resistance usually associated with these forms of colonization. Such a reformulation has to

begin with an analysis of how a postmodern pedagogy works by problematizing the intersection of power and representation in an ever-expanding democratization of images and culture. Representations in the postmodern world reach deeply into daily life, contributing to the increasing fragmentation and decentering of individual and collective subjects. Not only are the old categories of race, gender, sexuality, age, and class increasingly rewritten in highly differentiating and often divisive terms, but the space of the social is further destabilized through niche marketing which constructs identities around lifestyles, ethnicity, fashion, and a host of other commodified subject positions. Central here is the issue of how power has become an important cultural and ideological form, particularly within the discourse of difference and popular culture. Cultural workers need a new map for registering and understanding how power works to inscribe desires and identities and create multiple points of antagonism and struggle. Also in serious need of consideration is the creation of a new kind of pedagogical politics and pedagogy organized through guiding narratives that link global and local social contexts, provide new articulations for engaging popular culture within rather than outside new technologies and regimes of representation, and offer a moral language for expanding the struggle over democracy and citizenship to ever-widening spheres of daily life.

Clearly, more is at issue here than understanding how representations work to construct their own systems of meaning, their own social organizations, their own cultural identifications. In part, cultural workers must investigate the new politics of commerce not merely as an economic issue, that is, as symptomatic of the new configurations of a post-Fordist world, but as a reaction to the emergence and, in the words of David Bennet and Terry Collits, the "assertion of new ethnicities, problems of racism, problems of nationality, of law, of discrimination, and the assertion of particular communities."⁴⁵ Furthermore, this type of analysis suggests reformulation of a politics and pedagogy of difference around an ethical discourse that both challenges the ideological grounds and representations of commerce and limits those public spheres it attempts to appropriate. If a politics of difference is to be linked not merely to registering "otherness" but to identifying the conditions through which others become critical agents, the ethic of consumerism must be challenged by exposing its limits. As cultural workers we need to take up the challenge of teaching ourselves, our students, and others to acknowledge our and their complicity in the discourse and practice of consumerism while at the same time bringing the hope mobilized by such practices to a principled and persistent crisis. This is not to invoke a vulgar critique of the real pleasures of buying, or to underestimate the diverse ways in which

people negotiate the terrain of the market or reappropriate goods through resisting and oppositional practices. Rather these practices require recognition of the political and pedagogical limits of consumerism, its often active involvement in creating new identities, and its ongoing assault on the notion of insurgent differences in a multicultural and multiracial democracy. Individual and collective agency is about more than buying goods, and social life in its most principled forms points beyond the logic of the market as a guiding principle. It is up to cultural workers and other progressive educators to address these issues directly as part of a postmodern political and pedagogical challenge.

2

Politics and Innocence in the Wonderful World of Disney

An alarming defensiveness has crept into America's official image of itself, especially in its representations of the national past. Every society and official tradition defends itself against interferences with its sanctioned narratives; over time these acquire an almost theological status, with founding heroes, cherished ideas and values, national allegories having an inestimable effect in cultural and political life.

—Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

Ideas, texts, even people can be made sacred . . . but even though such entities, once their sacredness is established, seek to proclaim and to preserve their own absoluteness, their inviolability, the act of making sacred is in truth an event of history . . . And events in history must always be subject to questioning, deconstruction, even to declarations of their obsolescence. To respect the sacred is to be paralysed by it.

—Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*

POPULAR CULTURE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR MEMORY

In different ways, Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, and Salman Rushdie, in *Imaginary Homelands*, are addressing the complex relationship