



The Simpsons, 1992

of a media work, but rather suggests a deliberately playful engagement with the idea of the forms of popular culture.

Addressing the postmodern consumer

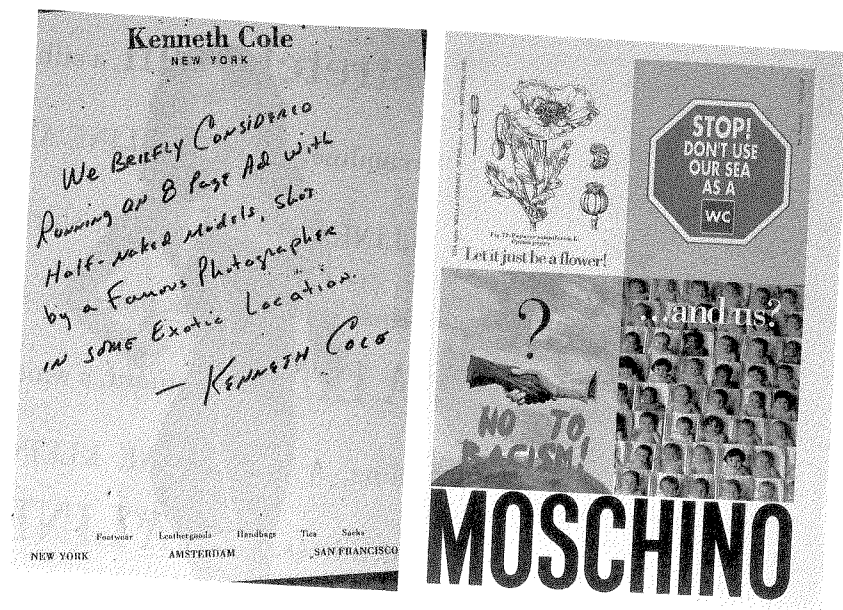
All of these stylistic strategies rework the relationship to the viewer/reader/consumer. Rather than thinking of viewers/consumers as dupes or as easily manipulated, these cultural products assume that viewers are media literate and a bit jaded by contemporary popular culture. They posit viewers who are informed about the conventions of popular culture, who know enough to understand intertextual references to other popular texts, and, in the case of advertisements, who are always potentially bored and ready to hit the remote control. Advertisements in particular tend increasingly to speak to consumers with a tone of knowing collusion. Advertisers address the consumer in a sly insider voice, a voice that says, "we know that you know how ads work and that you are not easily fooled. We are not going to condescend to you but rather are going to bring you into the process." This is a form of *metacommunication*, in which the ad speaks to the

viewer as a postmodern strategy about the process of viewing the ad. It speaks not directly, but at a "meta" or reflexive level, in other words, the subject of the exchange (between viewer and the voice of the ad or text) is the relationship between the two. Hence, the ad is talking to the consumer not about buying the product, but about the process of looking at the ad. This technique allows advertisers to address jaded consumers in a new way and hence to get their attention. This metacommunication has the same goal as earlier forms of address in advertising—it is still about selling the product, brand, logo, or company image.

Metacommunication can be thought of as a postmodern strategy of addressing viewers/consumers, in that it appears to address viewers as more sophisticated and knowing. In always making reference to strategies of advertising, these ads appear to invite the viewer into the conference room of the advertising agency and to let them in on the secrets of the selling campaign. Yet, their actual goal is to get viewers' attention long enough to create a *commodity sign* for their product.

In the 1992 ad on the next page, Kenneth Cole displays not a product but a handwritten memo which mocks typical fashion ads. This ad establishes metacommunication with the viewer by discussing the decisions that supposedly went into the ad. It is designed to allow the viewer/consumer to feel that designer Kenneth Cole is speaking directly to them. This technique interpellates consumers who understand the conventions of fashion ads and are presumably bored with them. The metacommunication of the ad captures the viewer's attention but, most importantly, establishes Kenneth Cole shoes as hip, smart, and feminist. This is a company, the ad implies, that will not condescend to women consumers by showing them yet another image of air-brushed models wearing their goods. The handwritten note, which conveys a spontaneity and familiarity, thus aims to make the viewer/consumer feel they have a particular personal connection with the company.

Styles of metacommunication in advertisements often take the form of anti-ads. As we discussed in Chapter 6, these are ads in which the product is not shown, and the primary intent is to convey a sense of knowing or hipness. Often these ads use codes of *hyperrealism* to create this effect. The handwriting and askew angle of the Kenneth Cole memo makes it seem like a real memo lifted from the famous designer's desk. A hyperreal text is one that seems to be saying "this is real, take note of that!" Realism is perceived in our culture to be authentic, of the highest value, and better than something constructed. In

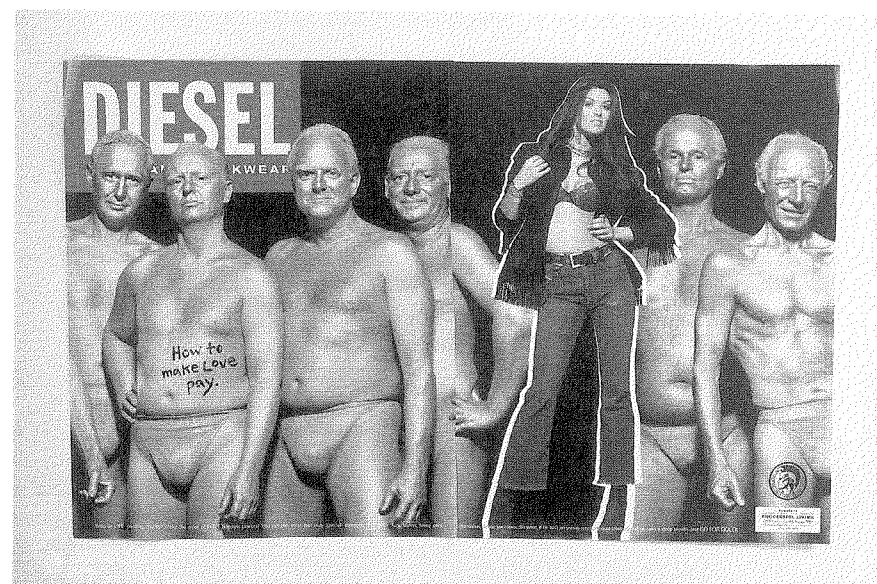


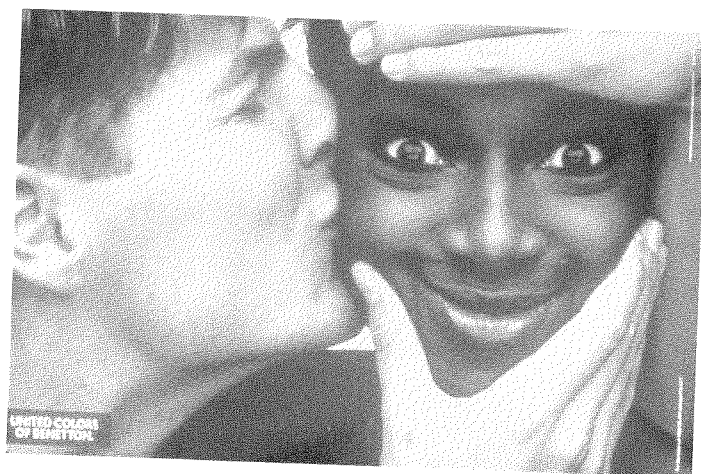
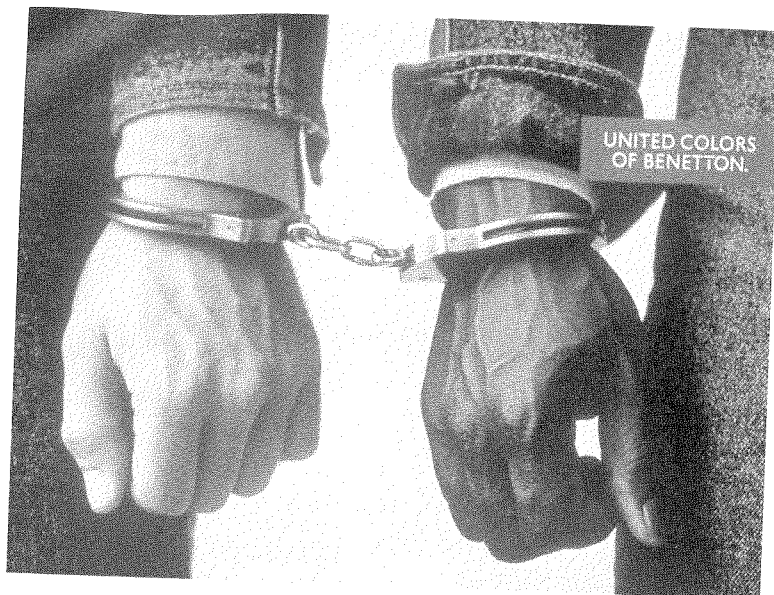
advertising, this strategy is in part a reaction against the increased slickness of ads and an attempt to make them look more spontaneous, intimate, and less artificial. This can be done through the use of grainy images, or in the case of TV ads, jerky hand-held camera movement, unexpected camera angles, “natural” sound, and the use of nonactors or out-takes.

In general, postmodern anti-ads discuss their products little if at all. Instead, they do the work of establishing a tone which will then be associated with their brand name. More often than not, this style is about establishing a product or brand name as hip or cool, or socially aware and concerned. This is meant to engage viewers by piquing their curiosity—to generate curiosity, as in, what is this ad about, and how can I get “in” on its exclusive world of meaning? This Moschino ad makes no reference to its product, but rather presents a series of political slogans. It works both to attach concepts of social concern to the name Moschino, and to get viewers to stop and examine the ad because it is unclear what it is selling. In this Diesel ad, the model selling the jeans is surrounded by strange men, all painted in gold, with no explanation. This campaign includes

many images of bizarre scenes designed to make Diesel stand out as cool and enigmatic. The campaign is intended to shock the viewer through images of the grotesque and the bizarre. This is a tactic used by advertisers to stop the “page traffic” of someone casually leafing through a magazine.

This strategy is taken further in many Benetton ads that do not show Benetton clothing or products. They consist instead of dramatic documentary images, or highly charged staged images that refer to social injustice, racial diversity, and global disaster. The only reference to Benetton is the logo set across each image. These images pictured on the next page are enigmatic. While the first two are clearly meant to signify racial harmony and the ways in which the races are tied (chained, handcuffed) together in life, the third is harder to decipher. This man seems to be a soldier in an unidentified war, perhaps in Africa. What kind of bone is he holding? Is this a war of both rudimentary and sophisticated weapons? A guerrilla war? Close-up framing is used in all of these images to withhold information, to create a sense of mystery, and to depict the sometimes claustrophobic spaces in which people of





different races are forced to engage with each other. The unexplained aspects of this image allow it to become a free-floating signifier, detached from the specifics of a particular situation. It refers to social strife and conflict only in an abstract sense. What, then, is the meaning that Benetton wants viewers/consumers to attach to their product? As we explained in Chapter 6, their advertising is marketing social concern in the context of global fashion.

Benetton is capitalizing in these ads on the importance of the photograph, in particular the documentary photograph, as an *indexical sign* that carries the cultural assumptions of photographic truth. These images are recoded when they are accompanied by a logo, yet Benetton deploys them without any contextual information, as a means of stopping page traffic, rather than as a means of informing consumers about particular conflicts or political contexts around the world.

Through this campaign and subsequent campaigns, including the use of disabled children to model clothing and a series on death-row inmates that included interviews, Benetton has achieved considerable notoriety. Indeed, precisely because of the difference of its ad campaigns, and its breaking of the codes of advertising, the company has been the subject of countless media articles. Its name is now approaching the brand recognition of Coca-Cola. Oliviero Toscani, the man who designs Benetton campaigns, has said, "My

dream is that some day Benetton won't have to spend another penny on advertising in newspapers or magazines." Both Toscani and Luciano Benetton have said that they felt that the codes of advertising had become too boring. Benetton states, "We felt obliged to get out of the traditional advertising formula. Of course, our advertising has to have a traditional function too—to make Benetton known around the world and to introduce the product to consumers. But for us just showing the product at this point is banal."⁷ It is important to note the kind of blurring of boundaries indicated by such campaigns between the documentary and the advertising image. Not only does this rework the role played by the advertising image, but it also has an impact on the cultural status of the documentary image, given that it is so easily employed to sell mundane products. One could argue that in postmodern style, images are reduced to this kind of decontextualization and play, and stripped of their potential capacity to move and affect us in meaningful ways as viewers.

All of these ads engage in postmodern strategies that are about reinventing style and selling to media-saturated consumers. All of them acknowledge that showing the product to the consumer has become banal. For some advertisers, this fact means that ads must speak to consumers in reflexive tones, acknowledging the ad process. For others, such as Benetton, this means that ads should do another kind of work, such as addressing social issues. However, when such issues are raised in the context of an ad, whose primary goal is to sell a product or brand name, social concern is packaged and sold in a way that reduces its meaning. What then is the status of social concerns and political movements, when such statements are so easily coopted in the name of commerce? Does a political statement have any force when it is an integral part of an ad selling a product?

Postmodern style often raises such kinds of questions. Postmodernism addresses viewers as both complex readers and media and image conscious individuals. It is an ironic mode of viewing the complexities of contemporary culture. And, it is deeply cynical (in opposition to the uncynical aspects of modernism) about the level at which all facets of life appear to be commercial. Postmodernism is not necessarily liberating; just because it breaks with the tenets of modernism does not necessarily mean that it breaks with or is resistant to dominant ideology. Indeed, it can be seen as deeply implicated within the ideologies of consumer culture. In its rejection of nostalgia, universal humanism, and a single concept of truth, postmodernism is also about acknowledging the

overlap between the categories of art, commerce, news, and advertising. This means that there is both increased blurring of these boundaries as well as an acknowledgement that they were never as separate as imagined in modernism. Postmodernism signals the rise of a generalized self-consciousness, which can be seen in both the reflexivity and the metacommunication of postmodern style and in the constant questioning of traditional metanarratives in all facets of everyday life.

Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, translated by Paul Patton and Paul Foss. (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1988), 29.
2. Santiago Colás, *Postmodernity in Latin America: The Argentine Paradigm* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1994), ix.
3. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1991).
4. Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1993).
5. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Logic of Late Capitalism*, 39–45.
6. Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Unfinished Project," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, edited by Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), 4.
7. Ingrid Sischy, "Advertising Taboos: Talking to Luciano Benetton and Oliviero Toscani," *Interview* (April 1992), 69.

Further Reading

- Perry Anderson. *The Origins of Postmodernity*. London: Verso, 1998.
- Jean Baudrillard. *The Evil Demon of Images*. Translated by Paul Patton and Paul Foss. Sydney: University of Sydney, 1988.
- . *Simulacra and Simulations*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Lawrence Cahoon. *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*. Cambridge, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.
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- Robert Goldman. *Reading Ads Socially*. New York and London: Routledge, 1992.
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- Andreas Huyssen. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.