

5

COKE OR MECCA-COLA? GLOBALISATION AND CULTURAL IMPERIALISM



Figure 5.1 *The Independent*, 26 November 2003; Andrew Clennell

A group of British Muslim businessmen launched a campaign yesterday to tackle one of America's corporate giants. Thousands of cans of Mecca-Cola were handed out at mosques in Birmingham and Regent's Park in London, before a

It all began last year at the whim of a 10-year-old. A French entrepreneur, Tawfik Mathloufi, asked his son to give up drinking Coke because of its American corporate association. His son agreed, but only if an alternative was provided.

M. Mathloufi saw a gap in the market and has had success with Mecca-Cola in France and the Middle East. His company gives 10 per cent of proceeds to Islamic Relief, which funds Palestinian charities, including an orphanage.

When Rashad Yaqoob, 31, a Yorkshire-born lawyer and investment banker, saw M. Mathloufi interviewed on the BBC, he tracked him down and offered to help him with legal advice and setting up the brand in Britain.

Now Mr Yaqoob aims to capture 5 per cent of the cola market in this country. Worldwide, he said, the company was selling 'about 50 million litres a month'. Most of that is in the Middle East but there is a significant market in France, where sales are at 800,000 litres a month. 'There's a very strong anti-American sentiment', Mr Yaqoob said. 'Coca-Cola represents the excess of corporate America.'

'We wanted to give a bloody nose directly to the number one corporation that represents corporate America because corporate America represents Bush and Bush represents neo-conservatism'.

[...]

Mecca-Cola has previously given out thousands of cans at Stop the War rallies.

[...]

In keeping with Muslim ideals, the Mecca-Cola can states: 'Please do not mix with alcohol'.

In this chapter, we will look at the ways in which other cultures are caught up in **globalisation**: the effect of capitalism rendering difference as a set of products to be consumed, and at the same time, the effects of global culture on other cultures around the world. We are all used to hearing people bemoan the fact that places everywhere are beginning to look the same: you can buy Coke, McDonald's burgers and Starbucks' coffee in increasing numbers of countries; satellite TV beams music and fashions to teenagers worldwide; the internet now allows for instantaneous global communications whether through news pages, blogs or YouTube. Such has been the power of American culture, that cultural distinctiveness around the globe is being eroded, this argument continues. **Cultural imperialism** – the spread of global (or, in some versions, American) ideas and cultures – has steadily come to replace the formal imperialism and colonialism of the past. However, following the opening example, we will now examine these claims, and will find that while there are clear markets exploiting cultural difference, and while the power of global/American culture is unrivalled, cultural imperialism does not go uncontested, alternative voices do exist, and while they are still important

consideration of how other cultures are consumed in post-colonial capitalism, and then examine the nature of contemporary cultural imperialism.

CULTURAL IMPERIALISM AND THE 'SALVAGE PARADIGM'

Some have defined cultural imperialism as the use of political and economic power to spread the values, systems, ideas, and institutional forms of a foreign culture on a native culture. This spreading of cultural traits, from more powerful groups to less powerful groups, is a form of domination which accompanies and supports political or economic domination. Such cultural domination may be necessary for securing the hegemony necessary for other forms of domination. For instance, many would argue that the spreading of consumer culture through global brands such as McDonald's, Starbucks, Nike and MTV, is part of the power of America as the global hegemon, but is also central to developing a global culture that is accepting of US dominance. Talking of the success of *Rambo* and Chuck Norris films in Asia, Pico Iyer (1988: 5) makes the following observation:

When [the US author] William Broyles returned to his old battlegrounds in Vietnam in 1984, he found the locals jiving along to 'Born in the U.S.A.', Bruce Springsteen's anthem for the disenfranchised Vietnam vet, and greeting him with cries of 'America Number One!' 'America,' concluded Broyles, 'is going to be much more difficult to defeat in this battle than we were in the others. Our clothes, our language, our movies and our music – our way of life – are far more powerful than our bombs.'

Because the terms culture and imperialism are both very difficult to define, any definition of cultural imperialism will be the subject of a variety of different debates. The very possibility of cultural imperialism is premised on the idea not of culture (as in the old fashioned sense of civilisation or high culture), but the conception of a plurality of cultures: that there are many different ways of life all equal in their right to exist autonomously, a plurality of authentic or indigenous cultures which somehow properly belong each to their own area. Globalising or homogenising forces then threaten the integrity of these local cultures.

These individual, autonomous cultures are usually seen as 'traditional' and relatively untouched by capitalism as a modernising and homogenising cultural force. It is the processes of colonialism, globalisation and capitalism that are corrupting. With the spread of multinational capitalism it is assumed that this culture of consumerism will begin to overwhelm many aspects of native cultures. This process is therefore seen as one of loss. This perspective has often been adopted by anthropologists and is sometimes known as 'the salvage paradigm'; the desire to salvage what are mistakenly assumed to be 'timeless cultures' that are seen to be threatened by the onslaught of global culture.

CONSUMING THE OTHER

We will start this chapter with a consideration of how the 'other' has become an important commodity in post-colonial global culture in terms of selling

difference in products from fashion to film, and by selling places in tourism. These seem like fairly harmless examples, but Gregory (2004: 10) explains that:

This is not a harmless, still less a trivial pursuit, because its nostalgia works as a sort of cultural cryonics. Other cultures are fixed and frozen, often as a set of fetishes, and then brought back to life through metropolitan circuits of consumption.

Just as it was important to understand how colonialism was popularised and how ordinary people came to learn about the world, it is also important to understand popular understandings of the world of post-colonialism. It is impossible to do this without considering the role of the media which – as the name suggests – mediate all of our understandings of and interactions with the rest of the world. We will first consider the role of film and fashion in the reproduction of images of other places and people, before discussing the role of more educative media such as *National Geographic*. We will finish up by looking at the role of tourism.

Film

Both the images of colonialism and the consumption of otherness are central to contemporary culture. Britain in the 1980s and into the 1990s witnessed an unparalleled revival in films about the empire and colonialism. This coincided with the Thatcher government which used the rhetoric of Victorian values and even of empire in its discussion of Britain at the time. In the 1980s alone various films were produced that created a romanticised account of the colonial experience, most especially the experience of colonialism in India, such as *The Jewel in the Crown*, *The Far Pavillions*, *Staying On*, *A Passage to India*, *Gandhi*, *Heat and Dust* and *Kim*.

In an essay published in 1984, the author Salman Rushdie described the rise in interest in colonial history at that time:

Anyone who has switched on the television set, been to the cinema or entered a bookshop in the last few months will be aware that the British Raj, after three and a half decades in retirement, has been making a sort of comeback. After the big-budget fantasy double-bill of *Gandhi* and *Octopussy* we have had the black-face minstrel-show of *The Far Pavilions* in its TV serial incarnation, and immediately afterwards the overpraised *Jewel in the Crown*. I should also include the alleged 'documentary' about Subhas Chandra Bose, Granada Television's *War of the Springing Tiger*, which, in the finest traditions of journalistic impartiality, described India's second-most-revered independence leader as a 'clown'. And lest we begin to console ourselves that the painful experiences are coming to an end, we are reminded that David Lean's film of *A Passage to India* is in the offing. I remember seeing an interview with Mr Lean in *The Times*, in which he explained his reasons for wishing to make a film of Forster's novel. 'I haven't seen

Dickie Attenborough's *Gandhi* yet,' he said, 'but as far as I'm aware, nobody has yet succeeded in putting India on the screen.' The Indian film industry, from Satyajit Ray to Mr N. T. Rama Rao, will no doubt feel suitably humbled by the great man's opinions. (Rushdie, 1991: 87)

Whether celebrating Gandhi, or more generally the romanticised history of the British in India, these productions remained firmly locked within elements of colonial thinking. Rushdie argued that Britain was in danger of entering a condition of psychosis, strutting and posturing like a key player on the world stage while the country's power was actually diminishing. The image that these films gave was that the British and Indians actually understood each other jolly well, and that the end of the empire was a sort of gentleman's agreement between old pals at their Club. This was true even of more revisionist accounts. David Lean's version of Foster's *A Passage to India* was not as critical as Foster had intended and toned down the more anti-colonial notes in the name of 'balance'. The film was still generally positive, in that despite the flaws, violence and meanness of empire it was still a fundamentally glamorous affair.

Richard Attenborough's film of the life of Gandhi seemed to offer the opportunity for a more critical account of British colonialism. However, Rushdie argued that the line of criticism was muted: Gandhi was a man who irritated the British immensely but was safely dead. Once again, Rushdie was critical of the way in which the story was told:

- 1 It was driven by an exotic impulse which transcended the mere historical details, expressing a western wish to see India as a fountainhead of spiritual-mystical wisdom.
- 2 The narrative fulfilled a Christian longing for a 'leader' dedicated to the ideals of poverty and simplicity, a man who is too good for this world and is therefore sacrificed on the altars of history (paralleling the life of Christian Britain's hero Jesus).
- 3 And finally, the film expressed a liberal-conservative political desire to hear it said that revolutions can and should be made purely by submission, self-sacrifice and non-violence *alone*, and also that the British being civilised they thereby realised such moral reasoning was a good argument for them to withdraw!

Artistic selection changed the nature of certain historical developments by putting a different spin on them. For example, the film narrates the Amritsar massacre in the Punjab, when hundreds of Indians engaged in peaceful protests were shot at and killed by British soldiers. Both the massacre and the unrepentant scenes of the officer in charge, Dyer, were presented in the film as acts of a cruel and over-zealous individual who was immediately condemned by the Anglo-Indians. This individualising of blame thus absolved the colonial system and the British public of any complicity. But this was not the case. The British in the Punjab of 1919 were panicky and feared mutiny. As in the film's account, Dyer's court martial may have condemned him but



Figure 5.2 Indiana Jones as saviour

he was still given a hero's welcome on his return to England. There was subsequently an appeal fund raised for him and he thereby became a rich man on the proceeds.

There is also the issue of the film being an outside production 'speaking for' Indian history. The film was predominantly produced by, funded by, and principally acted by non-Indians. Indian history was being retold by the colonisers themselves. It could be argued that during the colonial period the British extracted value from the textiles, tea and other goods from India. With *Gandhi*, it was cultural resources that were being exploited – the film extracted value from Indian history and culture.

Other films have demonstrated the continuity of Orientalist categories. For instance, the hugely successful *Indiana Jones* films illustrate the triumph not only of the western individual hero, but also of western knowledge and leadership. Indy rescues artefacts from the colonised world for the benefit of science and civilisation and to recognise the value of artefacts that the indigenous people otherwise do not value – in the second film, it takes Indy to save the artefact, the blonde female lead and the village. The *Indiana Jones* films continue the 'Boy's Own' style of adventure discussed earlier which provided a narrative of colonial adventure with charm. The exotic locations of the film indicate none of the complex politics and resistance of colonial period. Instead, the Orient is both demonised and infantilised. Often the 'good' natives are children under Indy's reluctant guidance (hinting back to the paternalism of the 'white mans' burden').

The *Indiana Jones* films, and the various others discussed by Rushdie, were mostly made in the 1980s. Have the ways in which the Orient has been represented in mainstream film and TV changed in any significant ways since that time?

Fashion

As Said argued, Orientalist images can be found throughout different cultural representations and productions, including, of course, the more visual forms of culture. Advertising, like film, is a very visual medium and in its aim of selling a product, it very consciously uses images. Although it is 'just an advert', it is important to remember that a lot of thought has been given to how each advert will work, what will be the most effective way of communicating a particular message, who the target customers are, and what characteristics and beliefs these people will hold. Fashion and advertising are highly dependent on familiar and easy-to-recognise imagery, and here too we find a particular image of 'the rest'.

Fashion advertising deals with colonialism and its effects in a number of ways. Perhaps most common is a depoliticised rewriting of history. In such cases, adverts present an aestheticised version of the colonial period which selects visual elements from various times and places to create a romanticised version of reality. For example, Ralph Lauren's imagery in his *Sahara* range clearly draws upon filmic versions of empire, hinting at *Out of Africa* and an aesthetic vision of crisp whiteness in the desert.

Another example comes from the high street. The US store, Banana Republic, started as a catalogue company but was bought by Gap in 1983. The name 'Banana Republic' is usually used contemptuously to refer to post-colonial Latin America countries, suggesting a lack of power and incompetent rule. But the imagery in these stores referred to colonialism more generally. In the 1980s and 1990s stores concentrated on safari and travel wear and were laid out like colonial general stores.

The *Petermans* catalogue similarly drew on such images of empire. The description of clothing for sale draws upon the traditions of travel writing:

Lord Kitchener reconquered the Sudan wearing the 4-pocket khaki jacket that evolved into the modern safari jacket ... [we offer] the authentic bush jacket for adventurers with a low tolerance for the ersatz.

This is an uncritical celebration of European colonialism focusing on movie versions of the 'empire' look, without any reflection on the nature of the experience or the power relations involved. On one level, however, perhaps it is unreasonable to critique Petermans and Banana Republic for this message. Why should they draw attention to the negative parts of history? Is

this the job of companies selling clothes? It would probably not increase sales if the advertising is full of challenging and unsettling images. Nevertheless, it is important to understand why particular images are so often repeated in advertising, images which reinforce messages received from other media, to tell us that this is what the world is like. Because advertising is so consciously and meticulously thought through, the fact that these particular images are used is evidence that they are perceived by advertisers to work and is further proof that Said was correct in pointing out the persistence of images of colonialism and difference throughout contemporary culture.

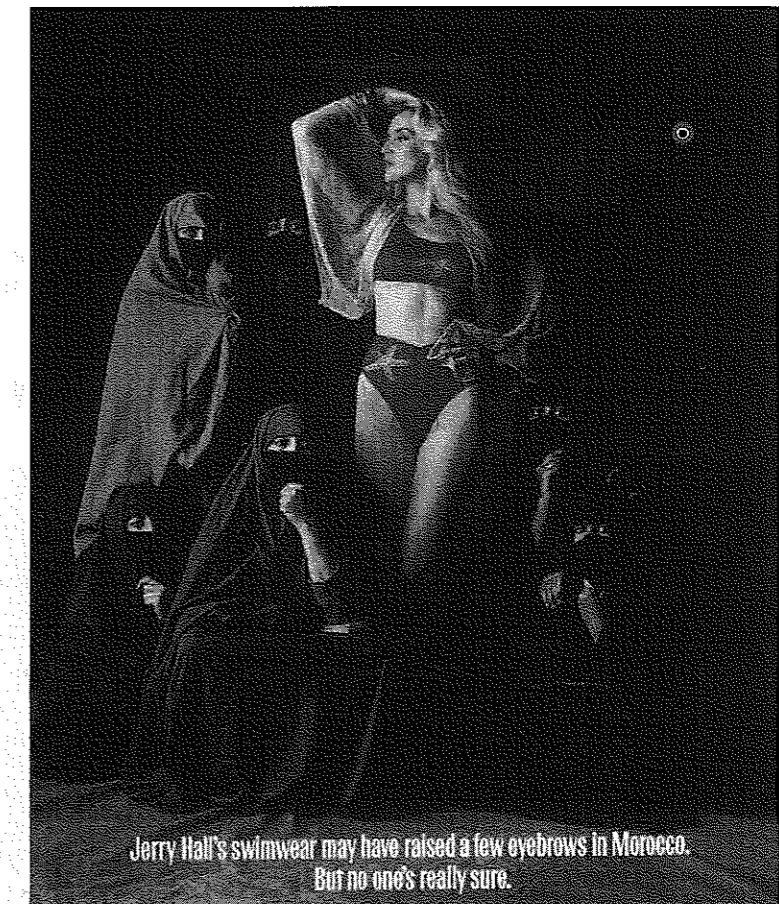


Figure 5.3 This image was used as an advert in the Sunday magazine of the *New York Times* in 1991

Take a look at the picture making up Figure 5.3:

- What symbolism is in this image?
- Which Orientalist discourses are drawn upon here?
- What might a feminist response be to this image?
- What is the role of humour here?

Look at other fashion advertising that is set in countries outside of the west and think about the discourses drawn on. How much of a break do they make with Orientalist traditions?

Finally, we should turn to Benetton. Perhaps here we have a set of advertising images that do challenge our inherited wisdom about geographies of us and them. Known for its controversial advertising, Benetton has played with images of the post-colonial world order and other taken-for-granted values. However, once again its use of controversy only works because the company knows it can expect certain Orientalist views of the world to be held by most of the people who view the adverts. The store's slogan 'United Colours of Benetton' is drawing upon what Roland Barthes called the 'family of man' (1956). This superficial argument suggests that we are now all equal, but varied and colourful, and celebrating a post-colonial 'different but equal' message. (This of course misses the power relations infusing the global fashion industry, where workers in the Third World in sweatshops on meagre wages create goods that are sold at high prices in the west.)

There are numerous images from Benetton campaigns that could be examined, but we will look at only one:

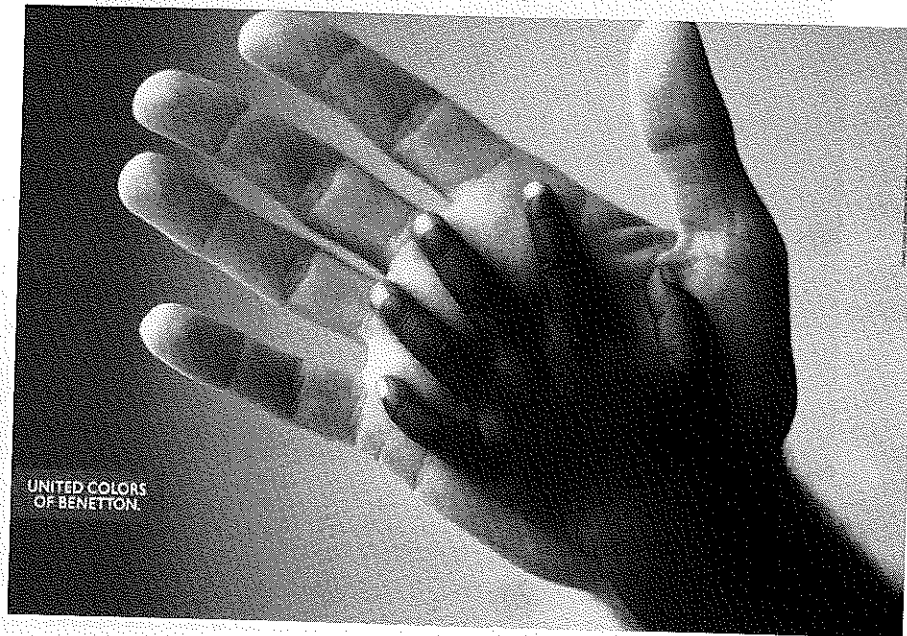


Figure 5.4 Benetton advert

In some respects this is a positive and innocent image where an adult hand is offering friendship and perhaps protection to the child's. But, the white hand is bigger and is active: it protects the child's hand, echoing colonial paternalism justifying European rule. Think back to the binaries running through colonial knowledge: the white hand here is male, adult and active, the black hand is childish and passive. Why aren't the colours reversed in this image? Benetton talk about the 'United Colours' of the world, but binaries of black and white still persist in a very particular hierarchy. What would happen if we did swap the colours here? We can see how shocking it can be when the image is reversed, as with a campaign run by the charity Drop the Debt.



Figure 5.5 Drop the Debt advert

Popular anthropology: *National Geographic*

If we think about where we have learned about how the rest of the world looks, many of us would probably point to *National Geographic* magazine. It has proved very influential. Read by around 37 million people worldwide, in the USA it is the third most popular journal after the *TV Guide* and *Reader's Digest*. Unlike the more frivolous images used in films and advertising, *National Geographic* claims to present truthful images of the world to its US readership. Nevertheless, if Said was correct about the on-going relevance of his arguments in *Orientalism*, we should see the same kinds of representations running through this journal as we have found previously in advertising and movies.

The *National Geographic* association has links with academic geography; it is widely regarded as educational and so has great scientific legitimacy.