

Shopping for Peace? The Benetton Jerusalem Catalogue

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At the core of Benetton's marketing strategy is the promotion of a sensibility which is not only applicable to silks, velvets, cottons, synthetics, accessories and (fake) furs, it is also a political, politically-correct sensibility in a seemingly orthodox sense. The clothing company's fashion philosophy promotes a natural inclination towards difference and the plurality of lifestyles, reinstating and reinforcing epidermal difference. Their latest ad campaign, the "Jerusalem catalogue" shot by Italian photographer Oliviero Toscani, is comprised mainly of photographs of Arabs and Jews together. In this advertisement, peace comes into being at the meeting point of skin and garment. Forget about the brute collective fact of war based on colonial conflicts. This catalogue invites us to delve deep into the strategies of commercial mimicry. Most of the images suggest a deconstruction of the binary stereotype between the colonized subject (Arab) and the colonizer (Jew), staging a dialogue that translates into the act of happily shopping or trading together. As is stated in the introduction: "Conflicts aside, people want to live, buy and sell, fall in love." Where else could conflicts be settled but in a corporeal unit, displaying a cult for transnational fabrics and stylistic autonomy?

Benetton's most current region-in-conflict of choice fashionably disguises issues of race. In one of the forewords, the prominent Israeli author A. B. Yehoshua writes: "The most shocking thing about Toscani's photographs is that in many cases I am unable to distinguish the Arab from the Jew, and I find this so disturbing, because all my life I have been sure that it would be a simple matter for me to recognize a member of my own nation and race." Yehoshua goes on to describe his favorite photograph in the catalogue: one in which a Palestinian man and a Jewish man are standing holding watermelons, and one man is kissing the other's cheek. His interest in this photo revolves around the impossibility of visually distinguishing the Palestinian from the Jew.

Conversely, one of the most arresting images in the catalogue is of a young woman, blond and tan, very much like the stereotypical Western supermodel. She stands in the middle of a group of people, which includes three adult women wearing traditional Muslim scarves, six children and a baby. In this group everyone has dark skin and hair. The photograph is described as "Jew among Bedouin friends," and the Jewish woman is further identified as a tour guide in Sinai (occupations are not given for the Bedouins). There is no mistaking the Israeli for the Arab in this image, in which the Israeli version of Orientalism is exemplified: Edward Said coined the term to describe the West's differentiation of itself from the Eastern, exoticized Other. Israel has historically aligned itself with the West towards the same ends. Of course, there are blond Jews and in this case perhaps we could say that Benetton is breaking a stereotype. But what seems to be more the issue here is Benetton's need to create difference: it is as though difference must first be visually created in this campaign in order to then be eradicated. This differentiation is self-evident in the clothing itself: while the blond, Jewish woman wears a stylish tank top that bares her midriff and bears the Benetton logo, the Bedouins are wearing what appears

to be typical clothing of people living in a poor Arab village. As it turns out, it is all Benetton clothing, as is described in the catalogue introduction: "[The Jerusalem catalogue is an] unusual catalogue that's also a reportage, or [an] unusual reportage in which everyone wears Benetton clothes (even if no one notices)." What is elided in this image is the fact that the relations between Bedouins and Israelis is not equivalent to that between Palestinians and Jews. The conflict over a homeland situates itself very differently for a nomadic people such as the Bedouins.

Benetton's campaign therefore not only recycles the slogan "Give peace a chance" but also attaches (paradoxically) all the nostalgic connotations of "home," symbolically overdetermined by the site of Jerusalem. This new idea of home is populated by bodies which are formed by Benetton; bodies which no longer know victim status on either side of the Arab/Jew binary, bodies which are stripped of abjection, of militarization or militancy, of vulnerabilities at the margins. They are instead wrapped in the homogenizing hygiene of a fashion uniform, even when that uniform appears very much like their daily garb. As part of its worldwide corporate idealism, Benetton also offers a specific stylistic mask, which stages notions of the Western concept of difference as part of democratic identity politics. These fashion statements mock difference in places where diversions and ruptures, scars and amputations often define the textures of the bodies in conflict. For Western culture, mimicry (even as pure fashion statement) imposes an identification with a system which is not internalized by the majority of the dominated minority (Islamic values, Hamas youth, etc.). The rhetoric of de-colonization displayed in the photos is invalid, as it does not indicate a re-evaluation of complex power relations. The cultural hegemony of the Western system with its material value system and its aesthetics remains unquestioned in this campaign. Benetton is successful in its strategy only because the catalogue primarily targets European and American markets, where the fashionable politics of cross-identification and difference are easily assimilated into a globalizing marketing launch. Only their peaceful commercialism shows its bulletproof impenetrability.