

Mambo Justice: An Unnatural Alliance?

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When the Dalai Lama tours the United States, his public appearances are staged with the sort of fanfare that is generally reserved for stars of the screen. Indeed, when the Dalai Lama tours the United States, he is often photographed with stars of the screen. Hollywood celebrities like Richard Gere have famously befriended the charismatic leader, while others like Brad Pitt and the Beastie Boys have been similarly vocal in their support. At one Los Angeles function in 2000, Sharon Stone introduced the Dalai Lama as “the hardest working man in spirituality.” Even high-profile fashion designer Anna Sui was so moved by the Dalai Lama and the struggle of the Tibetan people that, as Naomi Klein writes in *No Logo*, ‘she made an entire line of banana-print bikini tops and surfer shorts inspired by the Chinese occupation’ (85).

Such support for the Tibetan people is often projected almost exclusively onto His Holiness, the XIV Dalai Lama. Whether addressing heads of state or undergraduate students, the author of *Ethics for the New Millennium* has become a popular and accessible guru for the English-speaking world. In terms of media effect, the combined wattage of this East/West alliance is little short of spectacular. If nothing else, though, these cross-cultural encounters illustrate the degree to which seemingly disparate forces collide and coalesce in contemporary popular culture. In other words, politics and spirituality are no longer debased by what was once considered tabloid triviality. All things being equal, one might assume that such glamorous company would have actually helped the Dalai Lama’s cause, translating into real benefits for the Tibetan people. However, according to Patrick French, a former director of the Free Tibet Campaign, the degree to which the Dalai Lama’s celebrity status has actually furthered the Tibetan plight is questionable. If anything, he argues, the celebrity glow may in fact imply material gains and political favour where none exist. Writing earlier this year in *The New York Times*, French warned sympathetic readers of becoming prematurely complacent: ‘US enthusiasm for the Dalai Lama is not the same as genuine political support for Tibet. No US government will place sympathy for Tibetans above US strategic and economic interests.’ (13)

For French, the burgeoning popularity of the Dalai Lama, predicated on what appears to be upbeat aphorisms and red-carpet connections, dangerously obscures the intrinsically complex and uncompromising core of his ideals. Such ideals (like his outright rejection of homosexuality) are inevitably airbrushed out of the Dalai Lama’s mass-mediated image for fear that they would sully an otherwise palatable platform. According to French, the Dalai Lama’s appeal in the West is massaged more by a feel-good factor than by any genuine desire to ease conditions for Tibet’s government-in-exile (in Dharamsala in northern India), or even to understand the Four Noble Truths of Buddha Dharma. Given the issues at stake, French asks readers to reconsider the context and conditions of their support for the Tibetan cause. ‘Passion for the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism is a great thing,’ he writes, ‘but Americans keen to buy into that image should take care to

understand the man and what he stands for – and the moral complexity of life for Tibetans inside Tibet.’ (13)

However much French argues for a more interrogative and sensitive understanding of Tibetan culture, though, a nagging disjuncture persists. This has less to do with any holes in French’s case, than with the distance between his call – for a more comprehensive appreciation of the interests involved – and the more powerful pressures that shape and define contemporary popular culture. Namely, this is the world of Hollywood industry, glamour, publicity and spin. It is characterised by image politics and celebrity causes. Complex processes are routinely simplified and represented with pithy sound bites and coloured ribbons, all readily packaged for the evening news or the popular dailies.

Essentially, this observation is less an indictment of this culture than an attempt to understand what is often referred to as ‘visual culture’ – the idea that contemporary life privileges the visual as a place where meaning is created and contested. This life increasingly takes place on and before a bewildering apparatus of visual technology: Television, billboards, web-cams, computers, camcorders, ATM machines and surveillance cameras, to list just a few of the more pedestrian examples. Moreover, as Nicholas Mirzoeff contends in *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, ‘In this swirl of imagery, seeing is much more than believing. It is not just a part of everyday life, it is everyday life.’ (1)

However, as French makes clear, society’s growing capacity to visualize life – to conceptualise and capture meaning in visual terms – is not matched by a similarly proficient capacity to actually understand it, or to ground these visuals in more abstract or philosophical terms. On the contrary, it seems to be an inverse relationship, whereby an increasingly visual culture actually suffers a diminished ability to appreciate nuance and discord.

Interestingly, though, not only has this turn to the visual triumphed popularly; it has also been accompanied by a more ‘academic’ appreciation of its processes and implications. Most notably, in the fields of Cultural Studies and Media Studies, there is a general reluctance to condemn visual culture too quickly or too categorically. Of course, this is not to suggest that all or even most aspects of contemporary popular culture have been welcomed either warmly or unconditionally. Rather, it is to highlight the important insights that have enhanced understandings of the power dynamics involved, from the likes of Stuart Hall, Marie Gillespie, and John Fiske, to name but a few.

Importantly, however, many of the theoretical cues and ethnographic practices that now inform and animate contemporary analyses of popular culture have serious consequences for the types of issues that dominated and defined twentieth-century political discourse. Questions of justice and truth, for example, have been directly affected by postmodern scepticism towards truth and narrative, as well as the postmodern celebration of irony and pastiche. Politicised discussions that once banked on certainties and absolutes now confront a deep and widespread questioning of these very same convictions, and the methods by which they were rationalised.

And herein lies the topic at hand: the means by which this visual culture can still define and communicate ideals like truth, justice and fairness. These means must effectively elude (or ignore) what is often attributed to contemporary culture – cynicism, scepticism and a political lexicon that has been considerably weakened. In turn, this paper will do two things. Firstly, it will acknowledge the risks and costs of an increasingly visual culture, whereby a seemingly inordinate amount of space and time, both public and private, has been subsumed by the world of image, advertising, PR and spin. Secondly, though, it will advance an example that seemingly bypasses these risks and costs, an example that actively refutes suggestions that a visual culture is politically barren: the Australian clothing brand, Mambo. Ultimately, this paper will concede the conceptual ambiguities involved, but will regard these ambiguities with relief rather than regret.

To appreciate how a visual culture both complements and coincides with a postmodern sensibility, it is important to see where postmodernism breaks with other discursive regimes. A significant feature of postmodernism, then, is the rigorous questioning of Enlightenment logic. In postmodernist writings, the philosophes of eighteenth-century France and Scotland have been virtually emptied of epistemological superiority. The Enlightenment worldview, drawing on the influence of Galileo and Newton, was based on scientific objectivity and empirical methodology. Boyne and Rattansi defined it as:

a belief in the omnipotence and liberating potential immanent in the application of reason and science to both the natural environment and to social relations, a totalising confidence in the ability of human reason to penetrate to the essential truth of physical and social conditions, thus making them amenable to rational control (3).

Enlightenment writers, fuelled by what would later be condemned as a parochial and self-referential understanding of the ‘human condition’, believed in an ‘essential truth’ (or purpose) of human society. However, as it has been described and explained extensively elsewhere, the seminal writings of, for example, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, have done much to expose the serious fallibilities of the Enlightenment mindset. In *The Postmodern Condition*, for example, Lyotard attacked what he considered the inherently homogenizing tendency of Enlightenment thought, whereby ‘truth-value is deemed acceptable if it is cast in terms of possible unanimity between rational minds’ (xxiii). Effectively, the search for overriding theories of truth is abandoned; the production of knowledge becomes a type of provisional contract, ruled by little more than an internal logic, and disseminated only to the extent that it is immediately pragmatic. In this way, attempts to capture or impose fixed meanings are flatly rejected.

In the interests of brevity and pertinence (and the fact that these ideas are by now readily accessible, if not widely institutionalised), postmodernist literature will not be discussed in much further detail here. It will suffice to note that, by unravelling these skewed claims to universality, Lyotard et al complicate political action, as appeals to the social good will falter without a binding account of a shared reality. Against the modernist mindset, then, postmodernism draws attention to the fragmentation and discontinuity that

was either denied or dismissed in the ‘grand narratives’ (such as socialism or psychoanalysis). In this way, postmodernism makes way for the many and varied inflections that defy categorization or assimilation. Politically, though, this undercuts attempts to isolate fixed truths, since, as Hans Bertens writes in *The Idea of the Postmodern*, ‘there is no extra-political, Archimedean point from which the world can legitimately be moved through political intervention’ (189).

That is, a politics of resistance cannot argue for or against the status quo with any real authority, at least not without admitting the interplay of context and relativity, and thereby tempering the tone and vigour of political action. Effectively, as Jean Paul Surber explains postmodernism in *Culture and Critique*:

[Postmodernism's] proponents wish decisively and finally to reject all recourse to some privileged and ultimately ahistorical theoretical or methodological stance in favor of a historically embedded and constantly open process of radical critique. This critical practice does take up other theoretical options, but only in order to reveal their internal instabilities and to challenge their implicit claims to historical privilege (183).

Not surprisingly, this retreat from moral and didactic certainty has not been universally welcomed. Numerous critics question the extent to which a postmodern position can propel any cause enough to actually effect systemic change, since it will be inevitably circumscribed by a veritable litany of disclaimers and qualifiers. Others bemoan postmodernism’s infamous tendency to catalogue and unpack the constituents of contemporary culture, from Bart Simpson and Barbara Cartland to Saddam Hussein and September 11, without the verbal, philosophical and political props that would have once imbued these constituents with some deeper or lasting meaning. In this way, popular culture is often graded on a downward slide, from kaleidoscopic collage to nihilistic mess.

In other words, the postmodern disposition appears to entail an impasse of sorts, radically deconstructing projects and programs that once inspired hope and action, yet unable (or unwilling) to endorse any alternatives with real persuasive confidence. At the same time, complex issues are often only discussed to the extent that they mesh with the dizzying array of artifice and spectacle – and no further. Culturally, this would leave citizens lacking a vocabulary of dissent, or at least lacking one that cannot be ironically converted into a designer t-shirt or chat-show banter. In turn, either the irony mocks its symbolism, or the banter short-changes its significance.

Critically, this risks reducing the average citizen to the condition of ‘one-dimensionality’ – Herbert Marcuse’s dystopian forecast for advanced consumer society. In this pessimistic outlook, freedom means little more than product choice and brand variety, and language has been drained of any claims to truth or falsity – all that remain are buzzwords, formulas, slogans and jingles. It is, for all intents and purposes, a type of ‘soft’ totalitarianism. Ultimately, though, it faces little resistance from a buying public that has been seduced and silenced by bright packaging and slick advertising – what

Raymond Williams dubbed 'a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements' (335).

In a sense, Marcuse's fears are not wholly unreasonable. Considerable energy and effort is devoted to the panoramic dominance of brands, icons, slogans and symbols – the social, political and economic wallpaper of contemporary visual culture. Nothing is outside the promotional ambit: from spiritual gurus and presidential candidates to football teams and mobile phones, the pulpit and soapbox have made way for the billboard and Prime Time. For political figures, a stylist stands alongside the speechwriter. For charity organizations, a celebrity connection is the surest springboard to financial support. And for the Dalai Lama, famous friends have secured the sort of coverage aspiring stars can only dream of. In other words, contemporary life foregrounds glamour and graphics – the stuff of popular culture – and everything bends to this preference. For critics like the former director of the Free Tibet Campaign, whose resignation coincided with his growing realisation that foreign support had not significantly helped the Tibetan cause, the cumulative effect has been most disheartening. That is, this exchange between meaning and image has become unfairly weighted to the latter's advantage, ultimately dissolving meaning altogether.

However, while the worldwide ascent of spectacle and spin has had profound and far-reaching implications for society generally, it might be worth considering a case that actually disrupts this widely bemoaned symmetry between a lot of popular culture and the spectre of postmodern disillusionment. Australian label Mambo is a striking example of spectacular brand success, with its signature motifs recognised and sold in twenty two Mambo stores around the world. At the same time, though, there is a constant and infamous tension between its form and its content. Mambo's idiosyncratic fusion of shock and irony both affirms the logic and language of contemporary visual culture, while simultaneously subverting its politics and tastes.

In a visual culture that often collapses questions of criticism and dissent, Mambo folds these questions into its image. This is not to suggest that the Mambo brand offers anything resembling a clear and consistent prism through which contemporary life can be understood or even critiqued. As Morgan Richards writes, 'Mambo's "take the piss out of it" ethos is designed to amuse and scandalise rather than offer an explicitly political and counter-hegemonic analysis of cultural and religious practices.' (1999: 35) All the same, a case can be made that the amusement and scandal for which Mambo is renowned functions much like Lear's Fool, the court jester that cleverly uncovers the idiocy and folly that has been all but internalised by its society. Reg Mombassa, perhaps Mambo's most famous designer, puts it this way: 'Mambo celebrates Australian popular culture, but it also makes fun of it and it's quite critical at times of certain political institutions and figures. In some ways, I see my role as being like a buffoon who makes fun of mainstream things that irritate me.' (2001)

The closest one may get to a Mambo vision is the Manifesto #2, from 'La Revolution des Piss Artistes', July 1985. Reprinted in Mambo's self-published book *Still Life With*

Franchise, the manifesto is a fitting tribute to the irreverence and contradictions that characterise Mambo. It commits the brand to an art that

[Will be] confrontational and offensive and guaranteed to generate written complaints, which will be included in future company publications (such as catalogues) for the childish amusement of the management and staff. Genitalia, puns, euphemisms, double entendres, bestiality, and devil worship will be the vocabulary of the “New Order”. The artist who is not regularly condemned by a “concerned parent” or member of an organised religion, will be counted among the missing (5).

Essentially, Mambo is a Sydney based surf-wear label that specialises in bright t-shirts. The label was created by Dare Jennings in 1984. In less than a decade, what began with screen-printed T-shirts and board shorts was generating an annual turnover of more than \$10 million. However, to credit its success to matters of cut and cloth would seriously underplay (if not misrepresent) the extent to which Mambo threads politics, culture and polemic into its visuals. While a Mambo montage might feature the conventional signifiers of Australian culture – like the beach, thongs, sprinklers, and Holdens – it is almost invariably underlined with a sharp satirical bite. Indeed, the Mambo archive features similarly creative interpretations of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, Mickey Mouse and Shiva. Generally, the satire in question comes via the motifs that juxtapose these mythic tropes. Usually, this meeting of the sacred and the profane involves genitalia, animalia, or a combination thereof.

In this way, Mambo does not just overlay its advertising or PR with controversial innuendo, as some have suggested clothing labels Benetton and Diesel do. The Italian clothing label Benetton, for example, has enjoyed worldwide notoriety for many of its advertising campaigns. Under the direction of photographer Oliviero Toscani, Benetton attached itself to a rainbow coalition of causes and interests – The United Colors of Benetton. From safe sex and interracial harmony to Mafia violence and the danger of landmines, Benetton’s advertisements piggybacked a tight compendium of politically charged ideals. In the form of sparse, brightly lit images, the photographs were simple, striking and memorable. As a breathtaking illustration of brand logic, though, and one that passes for normal in much fashion photography, there is little to connect ‘Benetton the brand’ (AIDS awareness, pacifism, cultural sensitivity, and so on) with ‘Benetton the product’ (primarily, text-less knitwear and t-shirts). Without the green-and-white ‘Benetton’ logo superimposed onto Toscani’s work, the images (and their connotations) could belong to virtually any other brand.

This is not highlighted here to either doubt or deride the cultural and political significance of Benetton, merely to sketch the tangential nature of most branding exercises, whereby associations are arbitrary in the extreme. Certainly, a visual culture facilitates and even encourages this sort of semiotic slide, as meanings hopscotch seemingly disparate milieux. In turn, for those clued in to Toscani’s consciousness-raising efforts, Benetton can ‘mean’ AIDS awareness, pacifism, and cultural sensitivity, but mainly by virtue of association. In this way, the whiff of controversy is at a distance. That is to say, the politics and the product are a few steps removed, the product protected by a buffer zone

of contrivance. At the end of the retail day, then, the bright sweaters for which Benetton first became famous can conceivably exist without the politicised images that rendered it infamous.

Mambo's designs, however, constitute (rather than connote) an ongoing dialogue with contemporary culture. As Tim Marshall writes in the UK graphics magazine *Eye*, 'In the end, this is perhaps the most significant feature of the Mambo project: visual and verbal wit opens a conversational 'space' that is genuinely inviting rather than cynically strategic.' (2001) While the Benetton brand orchestrates a conceptually taut (if not rather predictable) agenda, the Mambo brand occupies a far more ambiguous position. It is where scatological humour meets surrealist transgression, reworking hallowed icons (from the Hills Hoist to the Virgin Mary) for both commerce and confrontation. Indeed, Mambo art featured in the Surrealism exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW in August 1993. Alongside works by Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso, Rene Magritte and Marcel Duchamp, Mambo lived up to Robert Hughes' description of such surrealist art—'shopping mall dada' (2000) – literally.

What is particularly interesting for this discussion, though, is the way Mambo imagery negotiates issues that are generally considered 'above' retail or surf wear, positioning them in direct contact and confrontation with middle-class mores. Moreover, however much Mambo foregrounds its larrikin irreverence, it is almost always fuelled by an impassioned (and at times educative) impulse. As Managing Director Dare Jennings told *The Bulletin*, 'We try to use people who have something they are quite passionate about and then it's up to me to work out how to use it. It's a symbiotic relationship: they get paid to do things that they normally wouldn't be able to do.' (qtd in Nicklin 41)

Importantly, such passion quite often breaches the shop-to-consumer continuum that usually defines retail operations. That is, Mambo has repeatedly used its profile to speak out against specific political currents. For example, Mambo's eponymous website lists its Pauline Hanson/REDNECKS t-shirt as its 'Greatest Achievement', with the \$100 000 profit from its sale donated to NAISDA, an Aboriginal arts development group. In 2001, Reg Mombassa designed a t-shirt protesting against plans to build a nuclear reactor in the Sydney suburb of Lucas Heights. The image read, 'Mr and Mrs Sydney would prefer not to have a nuclear reactor situated halfway up their arse', and \$A15 from the sale of each t-shirt went to Reaction, the anti-reactor campaign.

In this way, Mambo becomes a conduit for 'righting wrongs', albeit one comprised by its complicity in the system under attack. However much Mambo invites scandal and controversy (and it has, particularly among Christian groups enraged by its hallucinogenic renderings of Holy figures), the barrage of bomb threats, petitions and angry letters scarcely dent the financial rewards Mambo reaps the world over. Indeed, during London's recent heatwave (August 2003), half a world away from Pauline Hanson and Lucas Heights, Mambo enjoyed a staggering 70% increase in sales compared to the same week the previous year. As Kate Cox reported in *The Sun-Herald*, 'For the first time since Mambo opened its first store at Covent Garden in 1995, the stores have had to use nightly delivery trucks to restock the board shorts, summer T-shirts and mini-skirts'.

(56) In other words, it would be analytically amiss to attribute too much of Mambo's success to a like-minded consumer base-cum-citizenry. Clearly, Mambo's designs strike the right commercial cord, fulfilling a market need that is otherwise oblivious to matters of politics, justice or art.

At the same time, though, it does matter that of all the surf wear brands marketed and sold as 'distinctly' Australian, like Rip Curl, Billabong and Quiksilver, it is only Mambo that confronted and critiqued the latent conformity and conservatism of both surf culture specifically, and Australian culture generally. Moreover, as Mark Dapin argues, given that it is surf wear that is easiest to promote both here and overseas as 'particularly' Australian (36), it has fallen on Mambo to project an image that actively considers and questions this Australianness. Every cultural intervention Mambo instigates effectively speaks to, about, and against the status quo. From the initial encounter with its Farting Dog mascot, to the quasi-sacrilege of its Spiritual Adventurewear line (with its Jesus-Mouse hybrid hero), to the sexual politics of Maria Kozic's Mambo Goddess, Mambo designs move well beyond an adolescent pranksterism to a fundamentally humanist idealism. Where other brands strive for clarity and consistency, to the point of a conveyor-belt blandness that nullifies whatever hard-won niche they once enjoyed, Mambo's ever-changing stable of artists forestalls such predictability.

Effectively, what Mambo has done is take issues and ideas that were once traded in coffee shops, galleries, and parliaments – the privileged halls of politicised discourse – and put them on the backs of teenagers and surfies. There is little way of measuring the degree to which these perceptual jolts register politically. In other words, it is hard to link, either directly or otherwise, the electoral effect of Mambo's designs. However, this does not undermine the peculiarity of the Mambo project. As seen in the closing ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympics (as the Australian team paraded the brand), Mambo has, in terms of popular reference, become a national icon of sorts. At the same time, though, it actively unpacks the codes and conventions by which such decisions are made.

Mambo artists still regularly exhibit independently, but it is perhaps through their Mambo affiliation that they so rigorously refute the widespread cynicism of a postmodern zeitgeist. Where others decry the hollow commercialism of contemporary life, a simulation of both style and substance (the nightmare vision of Baudrillard's America), Mambo is an odd exception. It is odd because it is so thoroughly implicated in this commercialism, an unabashed triumph of brand marketing and global expansion. It is also an exception, though, because it constantly critiques the assumptions, stereotypes and sacred cows of this culture. Whether jarringly offensive or poignantly empathetic, Mambo seems to take the world seriously – but not itself.

In this way, Mambo can both engage with the world of image, publicity and advertising – the bread and butter of brand marketing – but it is not trapped by the conservatism and complacency that such success usually breeds. After a particularly negative reaction to one Benetton advertisement in 1992 (which featured AIDS sufferer David Kirby, moments after his death), company head Luciano Benetton was asked if he would

reconsider the campaign if it ceased to sell jumpers: 'It's an academic question', he told reporters, "but certainly I would think about it." (qtd in Mantle, 200). While brands like Benetton can afford to strategise out of controversy without even touching the product itself, focusing exclusively on PR and perception, Mambo t-shirts would be virtually unrecognisable should such a decision be taken. With Mambo, the t-shirts carry the controversy, not vice versa.

In short, Mambo integrates the concerns and passions of artists, promoting a worldview that is open, generous and accommodating. This strategy does two things: it aptly rebuffs the postmodern tendency to place image over ideas, and instead marries the two, indivisibly and unmistakably. At the same time, though, by openly admitting its partialities and grievances, biases that almost invariably hark back to shared assumptions of a 'common' and 'better' good, Mambo is not without the humanist baggage that Lyotard et al warned against. And yet, even this is not pristine. Mambo is politically aware, but hardly politically correct. Its relentless 'piss taking' ensures that no group, cause or institution is off-limits.

From organized religion to suburbia to the Howard Government, Mambo pulls them apart and leaves them fraying at the seams, and perhaps that is the point. So the cycle goes: Mambo proves that it is above (and at times beneath) the tastes, preferences and tendencies of contemporary culture. However, it refuses to submit to the extreme diversity of postmodern politics, or the radicalism whereby everything and everyone is contextualized and relativised, from Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone to Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich. In turn, Mambo offers up its own definitions of the good, the just, and the fair. These might well arrive via the lurid and the obscene, but, given the interests at stake, this might be a detour worth taking.

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