



Massa, Come Home

I HIS SUMMER [1981] HAS SEEN THE RELEASE OF A NEW commercial for Jamaica. It lasts one minute and contains 14 shots. If you watch much television, you have probably seen this little travelogue, which appears at all hours, on every channel, often enough to reach millions of would-be tourists. It presents a series of happy black Jamaicans,

each in a different picturesque setting, each making some soothing offer: "Come back to gentility"; "Come back to romance," "to our beauty," "our bounty," "tranquility"; etc. Finally, an old man with a walking stick, a crowd of well-dressed toddlers frisking at his feet, ambles past an ancient tree, and says, "Come back to the way things used to be." Make it Jamaica again, and make it your own. After a reprise of faces in smiling close-up, there is a high helicopter shot of a glittering beach, a horse and rider pausing in the surf. A legend then appears over this last image: "Make it Jamaica. Again."

Half-noticed, this commercial might seem just the usual empty allurements, merely one bright bubble from the great boiling cesspool of daily television. That inundation, however, is precisely what allows commercials to succeed: they come at us in stupefying numbers, each one overcharged and utterly forgettable, so that we find ourselves lulled into the receptive state of the well hypnotized. Although the process seems like an enormous imposition, it depends on our own complicity. It's only a commercial, we say to ourselves, then settle back, watching without really watching, thereby letting each image make its deep impressions. Although we have learned to distrust commercials automatically, this sort of knee-jerk skepticism is a poor defense against the subtleties of advertising, which can affect you whether or not you believe their ostensible claims.

We are accustomed to think of these subtleties in quasi-Pavlovian terms, as hidden stimuli that "turn us on" without our knowing it: nips, airbrushed into sunsets, lewd words traced into some ice cubes, etc. But this conception of the way ads work, and of the way we apprehend them, is much too crude. They function, not mechanically, but poetically, through metaphor, association, repetition, and other devices that suggest a variety of possible meanings. The viewer, therefore,

Ads function poetically, thru metaphor, association, repetition, etc.

from Boxed In: The Culture of TV

by Mark C. Miller

*in inundation
allows
commercials
to work
-hypnotic
our
complicity*

.....

does not just watch once and start salivating, but senses gradually, half-consciously, the commercial's welter of related messages.

And just as the viewer needn't recognize these subtleties in order to take them in, so, perhaps, the advertisers themselves may not know their every implication, any more than a poet or filmmaker is fully aware of all that his work implies. Of course, most of what we see in a good commercial was probably calculated by its makers, who are quite sophisticated, and who spend immense amounts of time and money on each thirty- or sixty-second bit. Nevertheless, some of these nuances might have been unconsciously intended, details that just "seemed right" as part of the commercial's general drift. Ultimately, however, these questions of intention are irrelevant. If criticism can demonstrate convincingly that a commercial uses certain strategies, then we can assume that those strategies are, in fact, at work, whether or not the advertisers might acknowledge them. This new commercial for Jamaica offers an example of advertising at its most artful. Its various strategies are worth analyzing in order to demonstrate how carefully these little works are put together.

The new ad differs from its predecessor, which ran from 1979. That commercial worked through physical appeal. It was arousing, mouth-watering, irresistibly rhythmic—watching it, you could barely keep from dancing over to the telephone to call your travel agent. The score was an infectious blend of reggae and Broadway, worked into a sort of overture that promised infinite renewal: every seeming cadence only opened out into a new and different phrase. As the song seemed never ending, so did those sun-kissed delights that flashed onto the screen in tempo with the music—girls, melons, golf courses, flowers, champagne, horses, lunches, girls. "We're not just a beach!" the voices finally sang, "we're a countreeeee---!!!"

That motto gave the game away. Taken by itself, it sounds bellicose and nationalistic, like a slogan for revolutionaries. Michael Manley might have used it to denounce the humiliations of tourism: a beach is just a stopping-place for rich transients; a country belongs to its people. It may be nice to go wading, but it is sweet and proper to die for one's country. In short, the motto expressed that very possibility of violence which may keep people away from Jamaica, land of "rude boys" and enchanted potheads. Of course, this off-putting implication was overwhelmed by the music and the images, which turned the threat into a temptation: "We have all that a beach can have, and a whole country full of other goodies, too." In other words, the commercial teased the tourist's fears away with an upbeat promise of inexhaustible bounty.

But some tourists have lately been attacked in Jamaica, and the Socialist regime has been replaced by the Conservatives under Edward

the first scene
the second scene
the promise
the punishment
the reward

humiliation
of the scene

the scene
the scene
the scene
the scene

making more than
not known their
not implication

discourses of home

direct address
interpellation
"you" can make it J.

.....

Seaga. These facts may help account for the peculiar tone and rhetoric of the new commercial, which uses no titillating come-ons. Its basic message, rather, is a deeply emotional entreaty: "come home." This is a familiar pitch in these days of right-wing symbolism. Ronald Reagan's speeches, *Time's* call for "American renewal," and numerous ads ("I'm comin' on home—to Wyley's!") currently use the myth of homecoming to enjoin our sentimental acquiescence in the general betterment of the rich. "Home" refers to an imagined past, a hazy paradisiacal interlude that fell sometime between Reconstruction and the Beatles' first appearance on Ed Sullivan. We were happy, back then. Watched over by God and a few other kindly gyrocons, we understood the meaning of hard work, a dollar, life itself, colored people knew their place, and nobody pushed us around. We inhabited a paradise that we can have again, the myth implies, if we just wish very hard and make no noise. The myth of homecoming informs this commercial in a complicated way. First of all, Jamaica herself appears to have "come home." The election of Edward Seaga, we infer, has brought the country back to its senses. Forget Havana, and those hoodlums with their odd patois. Jamaica is once again genteel, tranquil, and romantic, a colonial idyll in need of one thing only: white masters.

"MAKE IT JAMAICA. AGAIN." THIS MEANS BOTH "CHOOSE JAMAICA" and "Only you can turn this place into Jamaica once again." Or, in other words: "We're not really a country, we're just a plantation. These Jamaicans grin deferentially (and with perfect teeth) at the camera, their clothes recall the slaves' wardrobe in *Gone With the Wind*—no stark rags or dreadlocks here. And as they have "come home," so are we invited to "return" to a fantastic past: "Come back to the way things used to be," referring not just to "the way things used to be" in the Caribbean, but to the way things supposedly used to be in our own midst, right here at "home." From beginning to end, the commercial plays brilliantly on the repressed fears and desires of white consumers, and even hints at darker, more general longings. It subtly excites those fears in order to allay them, thereby countering the viewer's misgivings before they surface into consciousness.

The opening shot presents an image of impending violence converted into recreation. A group of blacks, wearing helmets, waving sticks, gallop on horseback toward the camera. One of them pulls ahead of the others, swinging his instrument down like a sabre, and strikes—a polo ball. It is an archetypal vision of imminent destruction (there are, in fact, four horsemen here), but the martial implication is simultaneously denied, as if to say, "You expect to be killed by our natives? Sit back and relax! This is only an athletic display!"

New Ad

discourses of home
Home
= image of
a past

the scene
the scene
the scene
the scene
the scene
the scene
the scene
the scene

choice of words
plankton
come out
to a post

plankton
image of
white consumers
polo



THUS WE ARE COMFORTED WITH AN IMPLICIT PROMISE OF unassailable spectatorship, as if Jamaica were as safe as our own living rooms. Various techniques further mitigate the sense of threat, without entirely dispelling it. The riders lumber forward, hindered in slow motion; they are also shot with a long lens, in shallow focus, so that they have no spatial depth and appear to make no progress, like painted figures. And the music—mellow steel guitars and crooning voices—lends the scene a sweet narcotic aura. The tune, moreover, is the one used by John Lennon and Yoko Ono for their song "Happy Xmas (War is Over)," and therefore evokes, for millions of young spenders, a peaceful mood:

Come back to Jamaica:
What's old is what's new.
We want you to join us,
We made it for you.

So make it Jamaica,
Make it your own.
Make it Jamaica,
Your new island home.

The riders look like police or a "peacekeeping force," yet they are neither: "Jamaica is not a trouble spot!" the image insists. "We have beaten our machetes into polo mallets." Polo is a gentlemanly pastime with imperialistic overtones, having been revived in the nineteenth century by British officers stationed in India. This hint of a national "return" to colonial status becomes explicit in the next shot. Three of the horsemen appear in medium close-up, facing us while cantering along to the right, and one of them says, "Come back to gentility." Who ever would extol "gentility" should himself evince refinement, and this light-skinned black, bouncing along on his steed in knightly fashion, accompanied by silent (and much darker) companions, seems aloof enough to make his endorsement credible. At the same time, this black pride is still a threat. Therefore, the second shot, like the first, flattens out that threat with shallow focus (all the subsequent shots are in deep focus, with their backgrounds clearly in view), and then removes it entirely by having the horsemen ride on to the right, exiting the frame: "Come back to gentility. [And now we'll be running along!]"

From this point on, Jamaica seems like a country made docile by defeat, its young men killed off in some disastrous war. The commercial's subsequent speakers are either women or old men. Moreover, while the horsemen were mobile, numerous, and unflinching, each of

USE OF MUSIC
Lennon's peace

Subsequent
Shots:
Women
elderly
34
stable



the following speakers is fixed and (even when among others) solitary, and looks up at the viewer discreetly, responding only after the camera has approached, as if not speaking until spoken to. It is a fantasy for the armchair buccaneer. Her vigorous males having vanished, Jamaica is now free to please her plunderers again.

A pretty young girl appears in a blooming jungle, up to her chest in exotic flora. She wears a bright red sarong ("I am . . . *Tondelayo!*"), has flowers of the same color in her hair, and holds a bunch of more such flowers in her hands. "Come back to our beauty," she says with a shy smile, extending the bouquet as if offering tribute. In fact, she is offering herself, now that her brothers are out of the way; the flowers are a symbol of her available womanhood. It is an old association, confirmed here by the common color red, and by her wearing a flower just like the one she offers. "Come back to our beauty," then, really means: "This dark blossom is for you, white man."

AS IF TO ASSURE THE VIEWER THAT THIS OVERTURE IS NOT taboo, in the next shot a burly, white-haired old fisherman, sitting at dockside, looks up and says, "Come back to our people." He could be the father of the willing jungle girl, but he obviously won't mind her having fun with the right folks: he has an air of gentle resignation, and sits winding a rope around one hand, in a gesture of self-restraint. Nevertheless, he is still a potential menace, like the youths in the opening shot. He could use that rope in unpleasant ways, and his phrase "our people" is unsettling; it suggests that Jamaicans are both alien and homogeneous, a colored horde.

That slight threat must be nullified, and so the next four shots counteract it with intricate denials of strife; all four characters are women, making unequivocal offers. After the allusion to "our people," there is a dissolve from the harbor to an elegant dinner table, the camera gliding across its lustrous surface to show us how Jamaica feeds her guests: silver, crystal, candles, and a huge lobster on a platter at the center. (Thus it turns out that the fisherman has grown old in our service.) As the camera comes to rest, a woman in native headdress and ample skirts, standing at the table to perform some preprandial task, turns in our direction and says, "Come back to hospitality," with a gesture that implies "All this is yours." This is, first of all, an assurance that "our people" will protect, not harm, their visitors. But the real assurance is more bizarre than this. By dissolving from "our people" to a waiting meal, the commercial implies that even the Jamaicans themselves, like their foodstuffs, are delicious and readily available. It is a metaphor for the island's total exploitability—this really is a great place for consumers.

Exploitability
- this is great
- this place for consumers
35

men + dangerous
we've turned
our mallets!
Lennon's love
gentility
light-skinned
black

elderly
approves
This is
for you
offering
self
Xp
plunder
offer

harbor
- dinner
- lobster

women
to
coming
to
hospitality

Afterword

.....

SOME MONTHS AFTER THIS ESSAY APPEARED IN 1981, Young & Rubicam aired a revised version of the Jamaica fantasy. The structure, pace, and music were the same, but now the sun was shining brightly on the island, the wind and waves were active, the natives beckoning in a snappier and more athletic way. The subsequent ads in that cam-

paign (a huge success) have all been thus superficially enlivened—and yet all have retained the sinister atmosphere of the original, the same eerie tranquillity that enwraps the captive slave ship in Melville's "Benito Cereno." This is understandable, since the appeal of this mythical "Jamaica" depends on just such ambiguity. The first ad was too dark—not quite ambiguous enough.

According to a few insiders, the campaign was deliberately lightened up in part because this essay had publicized the excessive gloom of the first commercial—one more example of advertising's impulse not to be too noticeable (see pp. 12–13 above). ■

