

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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I Want My CA, and I Want My MTV

Is it fair to compare today's work to what was done in the past?

Recently, the Communication Arts Advertising Annual showed up in my mailbox. Like it does every December. I've been a subscriber since 1993.

With each passing year, though, I find myself spending less and less time looking through it. The work that's showcased this year is...well, it's all pretty good. Nice art direction, a few clever things, some cool visual weirdness, a fairly thick "integrated" section I don't recall seeing much before.

But like I said, just pretty good. Nothing more, nothing less. Is it me? Why am I not blown away by today's work?

Then in a flash, I suddenly realized why. It's Huey Lewis' fault.

Or maybe it's Michael Stipe's fault. Or maybe Bryan Adams'.

You see, I'm a huge fan of music - and I started buying records when I was 7 years old. To me, nothing will ever replace the music I heard in the few years when I was 13, 14 or 15 - smack in the middle of the 80's, which many older people considered to be a musical wasteland at the time. But damnit, I wanted my MTV, and I still wish they had World Premiere Videos. It's not that I don't like new music. The White Stripes, Franz Ferdinand, Madeleine Peyroux - all are good, but none of their CD's get under my skin the way "Life's Rich Pageant" did. Or "The Joshua Tree." Hell, I'll even cop to being a fan of "Reckless."

Likewise, no recent ad has gotten under my skin the way Nike's "If You Let Me Play" or the beautifully black & white Norwegian Cruise Lines ads with the non-linear, poetic copy did. For me, those were the seminal ads that showed me what was possible in advertising. I vividly recall seeing those ads, reading them, re-reading them, and aspiring to write something that would rise to that level.

I suppose this is why some people get downright maudlin when talking about DDB's Volkswagen ads of the 1960s. Those ads were unlike anything else that was being done at the time, particularly in car advertising. The ads launched a creative revolution in the industry. But, let's face it, they look quaint now (for God's sake, you actually have to read the body copy to understand what the ad is saying!)

Getting nostalgic is hazardous to your career. The key to staying viable in the ad business is to stay current. I've worked with, and I'm sure you have, veterans of the ad industry who've simply rusted, whose skills are outdated, who attack every problem the way they did 20 years ago.

This is a wild time to be in the ad business. Technology is pushing us into places, physical and others, we've never been. Some people, and some agencies, will get left behind. And the new work in CA, well, it reflects where we're going, not where we've been: less words, more visuals. Showing more and saying less. Ideas that don't quite fit a 4-color, consumer magazine spread. Ideas that are worthy of recognition, even if they don't come in instantly recognizable forms.

Perhaps the new CA is disappointing 'cause no new ads could ever stack up to ones done in the "good old days" - and those are whatever days one considers good & old. Perhaps it's unfair to compare today's work to what was done 10 years ago, or even 40. The ad industry, like the rest of the world, has changed since then, and we better keep up.

Oops. My "Best of the 80's" mix just stopped. Does anyone know how to rewind an iPod?