

Beatrix Campbell talks to Adam Lury

## Positive Image

Adam Lury is managing partner at the advertising agency Howell Henry Chaldecott Lury

**You're smack in the middle of an industry that has been instrumental in constructing certain images of society, and you're interested in the language of empowerment. Where do the possibilities for change lie?**

There are particular advertisements, like our work for Fuji, which I feel are very clear expressions of it, but I feel that it's throughout, a whole style of communication that we've produced. In the 50s advertising sold something logical, tangible, functional about a product. Now that loyalty's got to be based on a belief in a company.

**So you're selling some kind of identification with the company, because it will be demonstrated through the ads to have values that people want to identify with?**

There are a whole number of areas where companies are putting things into practice that are socially positive in one form or another. They're missing out on a major marketing tool, which is that they can make those things public. At the moment particularly in the States a lot of companies are fending off boycotts. Heinz have just switched to dolphin friendly tuna, and there's the clean clothes campaign over here - you only buy clothes not made in sweatshops.

*The Daily Telegraph* quoted a figure of 50% of people in Britain who are operating some kind of boycott in one or other of their purchases. Companies should start saying, 'Let's tell people what we do. If we pay people properly, if we treat them properly, maybe we should make that part of the advertising.'

General Motors have just done a whole campaign which is based around the people who've designed and built the car, and they've got this female car worker saying 'Why I'm very proud that we're working on this particular model'.

**What comes to mind by association with, say, Ford in Britain, is that era of strikes, heavy duty foremen, sabotage on the assembly line. Given how a company sits in people's collective memories, I imagine it would be very hard selling that history to the consumer. How far do you need some sense that the company truthfully has modernised, is more democratic? Do you influence it happening?**

I can't impose it on them, they've got to want to do it. But if you say that's going to be a really interesting competitive advantage for them, and we can do an ad out of that, then that is a great opportunity. And if it works for them, other

companies will try it.

**What is it in the culture that's changed to make people identify values with products? What kind of values have a premium in the popular imagination?**

I think the whole breakthrough of mass marketing, where units of production equal units of consumption, has broken down for a number of reasons - like the feminist and black movements. The accent is on the economic power of the individual, people are discovering there are different ways open to them, in which they can influence things.

I think *Today* carried a story not so long ago, about how a post office union had banned girly calendars, and were also proposing a boycott of stores such as Hennes for their sexist advertising. And it wasn't a cynical piece, it was very positive - people changing their environment. Advertising is really reprehensible when it's used against you, but I think you can use it positively.

**Give an example...**

I suppose one that does try a little bit is the Oxo campaign where at least family tensions are being presented, however glossy it is. There's the Bisto campaign at the moment, which at least says that there are such things as single parents. Also the Intercity ad that's called *Relax*. I remember it took me three viewings to work out what was so fresh about it - that there's not a single white face in there. And it was just presented as 'this is life'...

**And this is Britain...**

Yes. All of a sudden you're miles away from Jimmy Saville and the three white men and the one white woman. If you can get mainstream brands using that in peak television hours, you have all that authority working positively.

**You're a centre of attention in lots of ways, you're felt to be 'now'. What's changed to allow your operation to be not just something which is felt to be marginal, critical, but central, and very successful?**

One factor is the emergence of the baby boomer generation. They're not fully in power yet. What they are is very powerful in the communications industry, and our ideas get picked up by people who are intrigued and interested by the things that we represent.

**Do you hold still to some of the values of the 60s? You don't feel that they're antique?**

They're antique often in the way that they're expressed. People have sort of held on to the purist centre of it, that's the way it was, rather than incorporat-

ing it into change.

**And what is the substance of those values?**

That there are alternatives. And at the same time interdependence, the insight that what I do here affects what happens in China. For me the most telling instance of that is the picture in *Newsweek* of Chinese students in Tiananmen Square with English slogans on their backs. What that said was: Those people are communicating with me; they know it goes through a satellite. That's a 90s expression of a 60s thought.

There was all this great fuss about Band Aid. In the 60s George Harrison did this massive pop concert in aid of Bangladesh - that was the first Band Aid. Geldof is heralded because he got the media thing, he used the technology. Harrison had a concert and then raised money, which was the appropriate thing to do at the time.

**There's still probably a lament in that generation, for a form of politics, which is on the streets. That's what a rebellion is. You're talking about transformations within institutions, or in culture like advertising. What's happened between the 60s and now, that has generated that pessimism about politics, but at the same time a real commitment to change?**

The same group of people have had a grip on power for 10 years, so strong that it seems immovable.

**And what about the Left?**

So often the focus was on what you are going to give up, what you're going to lose. It was actually as elitist as the Right. Also, they internalised faster and more deeper than the Right, the real contempt and fear of the media, which is silly, because the media is the natural constituency for those people.

Winston Churchill said, 'television is a tuppenny-hapenny Punch and Judy show.' Margaret Thatcher said that it's the most powerful medium on earth, it elected Reagan. If you say it's wrong, pernicious, you've got a disempowering message not an empowering message. There's no point having a poll tax demonstration in Scotland if the cameras aren't there. A woman got killed in Trafalgar Square and nobody talks about it in the media - you lose all of that power.

**One of the things Thatcherism calls to mind is the extraordinary phrase, 'There's no such thing as society, there's only individuals'. Advertising speaks to individuals as individuals. It speaks to their subjectivity, not to their sense of belonging to a corporate group, or a class. Is there a sense in**

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**which your work can be seen perfectly adequately in the context of Thatcherism?**

Advertising has been a great focus for things which annihilate identity. I think that Thatcher latched onto one dynamic within that era, which was self-empowerment. Suddenly the Left was saying, 'I don't know what we'll have then, we'll have disempowering', when there may have been loads of other things going on. Interdependence, Jesse Jackson's quilt for America - I think that's a really powerful thought, trying to articulate a different value. Because you reject greed, doesn't mean that you should reject enabling.

**What are going to be the key terms if the Left does manage to regroup and re-emerge?**  
Communication. Without question.

**Communicating what?**

For me that's a secondary question. It's not that it doesn't matter, but unless you are going to communicate, there is no way of reaching people today. If those groups and organisations embrace and use communication then they'll become a force. I think some of the central values will still be there.

There is growing popular recognition, of interdependence: what happened in Chernobyl still affects me in Wales. There was the pote- Image of the seals washing up on the beach, that came from over there. We are not an island anymore, we are all wired up together.

**All sorts of fantasies were constructed around the commodity that were felt to be inauthentic, how far do you run the same risk of fetishising corporations?**

I think that we would never construct values around a corporation that aren't true to that company. Most companies really do believe passionately what they are about. If you put something out there which is not them, you don't work with them long. But the distinction between the true and the good, the product unadorned and the company unadorned - I'm not sure I accept that.

**Do you get a sense that what you represent is travelling with a drift in the industry, or is it something which stands out as a critique? We know that you have been stiffly criticised.**

I think it is the leading edge of the industry, and the biggest danger in the way that the industry responds is to present us as the fringe. It's an incredibly dogmatic industry. The standard line on our work is: 'I'm not sure I like it, but I think it is very interesting'. There's sympathy, but there is still a lot of scepticism and fear.