MARK FOX

PLEASE PASS THE EFFIGY

Animation and Storytelling in Packaging

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I'M EATING PEZ candies at my drafting table—pull the rabbit head back by the ears and it ejects a tiny pink brick from its throat—when I start to look around the house. Lucian Bernhard's cat is waving its paw at me from a box of rubber heels on the bookshelf; the Virgin Mary prays nonstop from her candle on the mantle; a Mexican Day of the Dead skull smokes a cigarette atop my computer monitor. Everywhere I look there are packages with images of animals and people, symbols really, engaged in the business of storytelling.

Of course the primary story these images tell is a plug for their respective products: "Buy me." But commerce is only one of their narratives and, as some of these products are no longer made or sold, it may not even be a relevant one. The stories that interest me are those that resonate apart from consumerism: folk tales, religious or cultural myth and fantasy.

But how is Lucian Bernhard's cat a narrative? It "tells a story" insofar that it triggers my imagination. I want to know: Does it have a name? Does it have any friends? What do they do on weekends?

Shape as Symbol: Giving the Package Life

Packaging at its most basic should contain and identify its contents. Beyond this, however, are limitless possibilities for embellishment and narrative. One possibility is the shape of the package itself.

Two packages that amuse me no end are the honey bear from E. F. Lane & Son and the soap bubble bear (Pustefix Zauberbär) from Germany. These squeezable plastic figures are not just receptacles for honey and soap, but are personalities in their own right; one fully expects these two to serve honey and blow their *own* soap bubbles, as well as gossip after hours. These packages are not examples of anthropomorphism—attributing human characteristics to animals—but rather of a kind of animism, in which a life force is infused into an inanimate object. (This echoes the Native American practice of carving or painting effigies of animals on everyday, utilitarian objects to imbue them with the powers and attributes of the animal.)

Simple, jar-like containers function as well as bear-shaped ones in terms of holding honey and soap, but inanimate objects do not engage the mind like the animate, and my four-year-old neighbor Thomas will tell you as much. When I showed him the bears he uttered a "Hey cool!" several times, and then proceeded to make them talk and, to some degree, live. "I'm the honey man!" said one bear; "I'm the bubble man!" said the other. Meanwhile, Thomas completely ignored the more typical jar of honey sitting on the table.

A surprisingly animate package is the six and one-half ounce Coca-Cola bottle introduced in 1916. This bottle design is so distinctive that in 1960 the U.S. Patent Office recognized it as a trademark in and of itself, separate from the name and logotype. But what is the significance of its form? What is the narrative implied in its unusual shape? In his book, *Symbols of America*, Hal Morgan reports that "the fluted sides and bulging middle [of the bottle] were intended to suggest the shape of a cola nut." This is an interesting idea, but a laughable one; the walnut-like shell of the kola nut looks nothing like the bottle. Whether intentional or not, the shape actually evokes a human form and, more specifically, a female form; the undulating shape of the Coke bottle is similar to the highly stylized statuettes of female deities produced by Greek and Cycladic artists in the period between 2500 and 2000 B.C. Thought to be fertility fetishes, these statuettes gracefully accentuate the upper body and hips, thereby creating a silhouette not unlike the soda bottle. Further feminine associations come from the Coca-Cola company itself:

"Seeing comes before words.

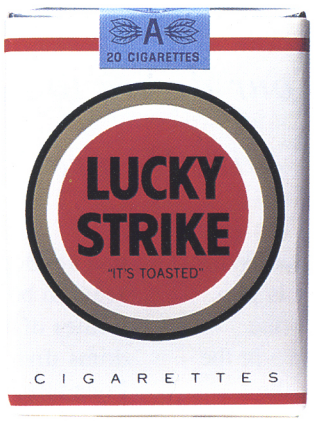
The child recognizes before it can speak."

JOHN BERGER

it refers to the bottle shape as the "hobble skirt" design; moreover, an earlier prototype of 1915 was nicknamed the "Mae West" due to its exaggerated curves. The next time you grasp that bottle around the waist and hoist it to your lips, ask yourself if what comes to mind is a kola nut.

A fine anthropomorphic design is the Old Crow whiskey bottle (c. 1930) which animates the distiller's trademark. The advantage of this limited edition ceramic is evident in its very existence six decades after its contents were joyfully consumed. It will never be discarded and, as a result, will advertise Old Crow whiskey with humor and style 'til kingdom come.

Humanizing the non-human satisfies our desire to reconnect with Nature—a Nature we lost somewhere between Eden and Poughkeepsie. Rather than attempt a return to Nature, anthropomorphism brings Nature to humanity by making it one of us—almost. This allows us a sense of camaraderie with our four-footed friends while nonetheless letting us feel superior to them. It also renders the unknowable and complex accessible: is it any wonder that the user-friendly image of Apple Computers is due partly to its reliance on non-threatening metaphors? I don't own an impersonal computer but a "Mac"; I don't type commands on a keyboard but rather select options with the help of a "mouse."



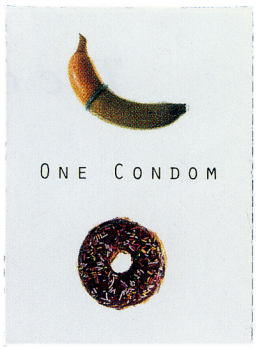
Can You Read Me? Image as Text

Images are more immediate than words; we respond to the shape and color of a STOP sign faster than we can decipher its text. As John Berger observed in his classic book, *Ways of Seeing*, "Seeing comes before words. The child recognizes before it can speak." The primacy of images continues even after we can speak and read; unlike words, symbols do not need to be fully understood to evoke a strong emotional response.

An image that communicates quickly and efficiently can be found on the package for Death cigarettes from Holland. The icon of the skull and crossbones is so well known that a product name is unnecessary. In fact, the package is more striking for its lack of text; too often words are used to define an image that would be better left to speak for itself. (Consider the typical description mounted adjacent to a painting in a museum and you'll know what I'm talking about.) Perhaps this package's most stunning aspect, however, is the unadorned veracity of its symbolism—cigarettes will kill you.

A more abstract but equally powerful symbol identifies Lucky Strike cigarettes. With its four concentric circles isolated on a white field, Raymond Loewy's 1942 redesign of the classic 1917 label created a mandala for 20th century Western culture. The circle (or sphere) is an ancient and universal symbol, and its meanings are many: the Self; wholeness (hence "holiness"); perfection; eternity (no beginning or end); the sun; the eye; and God. The package's strength stems from the hovering bull's eye and the tightly controlled use of color: red and white, with accents of green-gray (formerly gold) and black[1]. This design forces the eye to repeatedly confront the name Lucky Strike and its associations with the Gold Rush, wealth, good fortune and success.

1. Loewy's redesign would seem to be influenced by the highly effective color palette of an earlier icon of American culture, the red, white, gold, and black Campbell's soup can—a package design that later also caught the attentions of Andy Warhol.



In his book *Cigarette Pack Art*, Chris Mullen gives one possible interpretation of the use of a "good luck" narrative in the tobacco industry: "The idea of 'Lucky' tobacco is one that crops up over and over again. In a primitive way, the pack of cigarettes is a talisman against fate. It is an old French superstition that, in the face of the incomprehensible or threatening, the man with his hand in his pocket touches his left testicle for luck. Perhaps the pack is meant to provide alternative consolation." Mullen's hypothesis gives new meaning to the Lucky Strike slogan, "When Tempted, Reach for a Lucky."

The Power of Myth

Design that references religious or cultural myth can be especially effective because it associates the product with the power and history of the myth. An interesting example of this is the Lux Perpetua (Perpetual Light) prayer candle from Peru which features a portrait of the Virgin Mary. Like the burning of incense in other religious traditions, the burning of a prayer candle symbolizes one's prayers ascending heavenward to God. What is unusual about this label, however, is that Mary is pictured without her typical nimbus. It is only when one lights the candle that she finally receives her halo—in the form of the flame hovering overhead. By linking the appearance of Mary's nimbus with the acts of praying and lighting the candle, the design symbolically connects one's religious devotion to Mary's holiness.

The image for the Spanish "Celestial" razor blades (c. 1930) propels a mundane object of daily use into numinous realms. This is clearly not a literal representation of the product; the disembodied hand and blade reside in a flame without being consumed. Although on one level this merely suggests that the blades are durable and long lasting, on another it links the product with the divine by evoking such Biblical traditions as Moses and the Burning Bush, and the fiery furnace of the "Book of Daniel" into which Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown. In addition, the flame itself forms a mandorla, the almond-shaped aureole enveloping representations of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Who wouldn't want to shave with such mythic blades? For those of you amused by such a seemingly anachronistic marketing concept, consider these contemporary American products: Ajax cleanser, which seeks to associate the product's cleaning ability with the power of the legendary Greek warrior; the Eveready battery, which depicts a cat with a bolt tail leaping through a numeral nine to suggest that the batteries have "nine lives" or Jolly Green Giant vegetables, a pairing which presents an even greater leap of logic than a Greek warrior scouring your toilet.

Humanizing the non-human satisfies our desire to reconnect with Nature.

Narrative as Teacher

As Paul Rand has noted, the use of humor in design has the advantage of disarming and amusing an audience while simultaneously persuading and educating it. Although one might think that condoms are inherently funny, most condom packages seem to be designed with the comedic and aesthetic sensibilities of Jesse Helms. A happy exception are the condoms distributed by the San Francisco AIDS Foundation. Rather than sidestep the delicate subject of sex, this design embraces it, promoting safe sex with humor by juxtaposing a rubber-sporting banana with a chocolate doughnut. (The multi-colored jimmies evoke the rainbow flag of Gay Pride, a symbol of diversity and tolerance.) This narrative is continued on the inside of the package, where only the banana peel, the discarded condom, and a few jimmies are left; the banana and doughnut having been consumed by their passion. With a subject as serious as AIDS, a light approach is something of a relief.

A different but no less effective approach was taken by

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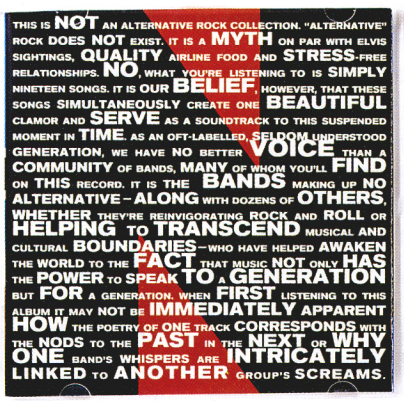

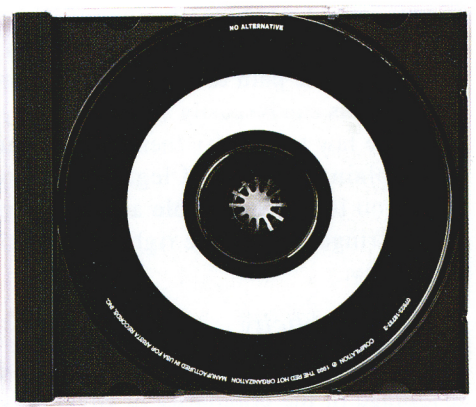

Bureau in their design for the compilation compact disc "No Alternative," conceived as a project for AIDS awareness and fundraising by the Red Hot Organization. The title "No Alternative" refers to the music, of course—it features "alternative" artists like Nirvana, the Beastie Boys and Patti Smith—but it also emphasizes that we have no alternative but to respond to the crisis of AIDS.

The "Jane, Dick, and Spot" images of the girl (or boy; there are two versions of the cover) were chosen because, in the words of Bureau partner Marlene McCarty, "The idea of children automatically infers the idea of future. AIDS is going to be a part of the future of regular American kids." (This idea is further reinforced by the repeated use of a target.) Bureau superimposed typography across the child's eyes to de-emphasize her identity and thus allow her to symbolize all children, thereby negating the argument that AIDS can't happen to *us*. The design is remarkable in that it effectively sells the product and delivers a strong social message to a traditionally unreceptive audience: disenfranchised middle-class youth. McCarty describes this effort to market products whose sales benefit nonprofit causes as "grown-up activism."

PEZ Anyone?

Narrative interests me because, quite simply, it gives my life meaning. Neil Postman, in his address to the AIGA conference last October, asserted that narrative "gives meaning to the past, explains the present, and provides guidance for the future." But Postman's concept of meaningful narrative is more grand (and more narrowly defined) than my own. His idea of meaningful narrative—"stories of human history"—revolves around religion, politics and ideology. Mine is as simple as the Bon Ami cleanser chick that "hasn't scratched yet." This particular narrative (and countless others like it) is meaningful to me because it is imaginative and playful. It creates an improbable association between a product and natural history that I find surprising, amusing, and even—in an odd way—comforting.

I reload my rabbit. This time with purple PEZ.

Editor's note: The icons of design, visual clichés or metaphors, hold deep unconscious meaning for many of us. Mark Fox, who uses these images with great power in his own work, brings a fresh view of iconography to us through this essay. — DK HOLLAND