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## Dedicated follower of Gruen

Monty Arnhold | June 11, 2008

**THE ABC's *The Gruen Transfer* has now screened its second episode and as a dedicated advertising enthusiast it has already become compulsory viewing for Monty Arnhold.**

Naturally it has divided opinion, with some ordinary viewers claiming its frequent smutty innuendo, particularly the quips of host Wil Anderson, would make even the writers of *Are You Being Served?* cringe.

For some industry insiders it seems to confirm the impression that adfolk just dash off the first funny or outrageous idea they think of, with not so much as a nod to the often meticulous strategic process that actually precedes the arrival of a brief on the creative team's desks.

That those same creatives might not give a tinker's cuss whether or not their work will drive the client's business is of course another impression that the program might also give. But that's a whole other topic, isn't it?

Of course *The Gruen Transfer* could be better in so many ways but for all its faults, it's interesting nevertheless.

In episode two, we saw opposing viewpoints and genuine debate on the subject of a commercial that achieved notoriety when it was distributed as a viral email.

It was for the American clothing brand Marc Ecko and is famous because it featured a stunt in which graffiti artists were filmed scaling the security fence at Edwards Air Force base to spray paint what appeared to be the US President's jet, Air Force One with the Ecko slogan "Still Free".

When it was seeded on 20 websites it caused a furore: The security of the President's plane had been breached!

The fascination with it spread like wildfire - until it was revealed that the stunt was a fraud, using a faked-up plane, which had been carefully painted to resemble Air Force One.

The clip achieved 115 million hits on the net and was hailed as a pioneering method of distributing advertising through unconventional channels.

It was devised by the founding New York office of the new darlings of the Australian advertising industry, an agency named Droga5.

To dare to criticise their work is tantamount to high treason in the ad industry, so it was refreshing that *The Gruen Transfer* panel disagreed vehemently as to whether this was an example of good advertising or not.

Lauded quite credibly as brilliant and breakthrough by George Patterson Y&R MD Russell Howcroft who described it as "advertising nirvana", the spot was then roundly and passionately dismissed by Leo Burnett MD Todd Sampson, who argued that once it was discovered that the spot was a fake, rather than giving the brand the street cred it sought, it made the Marc Ecko brand seem to be a fake in the eyes of its uber-cool target audience.

The discussion was like watching two barristers going head to head in a courtroom drama. First I found myself agreeing with Howcroft, then persuaded by Sampson.

Another fascinating segment in this episode of The Gruen Transfer was one which examined underwear advertising.

Among several campaigns critiqued was the classic spot for Antz Pantz which ran about two decades ago. It's the one that looks like it's set in a sweaty, moodily-lit Bangkok hotel room. Ants crawl over the panty-clothed legs and nether regions of an attractive, scantily-clad Australian model until she summonses an anteater with the command "Sic 'em, Rex!"

The commercial quite rightly won lots of awards and went down in advertising history. Unusually and significantly perhaps, it was created by two women, both of whom have now worked successfully for many years in the US.

One of the panellists correctly identified that when you stripped back the production values and the fun, it was in essence nothing more than an excellent example of good branding. I agree. The commercial was unambiguously for Antz Pantz.

Perhaps the most remarkable comment from The Gruen Transfer panellists came from the wonderful Jane Caro, who said that the subtext of the commercial was about ants being "drawn to the honeypot". Excellent stuff indeed.

Still on the subject of underwear, the show discussed a breakthrough poster for Calvin Klein, which in its own way revolutionised underwear advertising in the US.

It's the famous one which featured the then fairly unknown US actor/model "Marky" Mark Wahlberg.

The point which emerged from the discussion of this ad was that prior to Calvin Klein producing their underwear range, the brand of underwear men wore was effectively anonymous.

But with their large logo on the elastic waistband of the garment, suddenly even one's underpants could make a fashion statement.

For youth of a certain age, suddenly it became de rigueur to wear your jeans so low that your brand of underwear could be seen. And so it still is today.

The size and position of the client's logo, and in particular its size in their print advertising, has always been the subject of animated discussion in ad agencies.

The cliché here is that the art director always wants the logo smaller, and the client always wants the logo larger. And the position of the logo, usually in the bottom right hand corner seems to be sacrosanct.

I was reminded of this just the other day by a curious news item in The Australian. It went thus: "BBC Journo in alleged royal conspiracy".

"The BBC has rejected police allegations in Thailand that one of its correspondents insulted revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej, a charge that can result in up to 15 years in jail."

So what on Earth did the correspondent do to be accused of this heinous crime?

One of the specific complaints relates to the placing of a picture of former Prime Minister Mr Thaksin Shinawatra above a picture of the King on the BBC website, in contravention of a Thai convention that images of the monarch must always be at the top.

Many crimes have been committed in the name of advertising and we can all name a few. But none, however appalling, can attract a 15-year jail sentence.

Monty Arnhold is founder of A Second Opinion which offers marketers unbiased creative appraisal of advertising ideas.

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