

## **Stereotypes and Icons in Activist Artworks**

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A stereotype is a belief or generalisation about a person, or a group of people, popularly held in society. These beliefs ignore individual differences in appearance, attitude and values, and assume each and every member of the group is the same, or similar. Some examples of typical stereotypes found in society are the businessman, the 'preppy' teenager and the football 'thug'. Icons are symbols or signs that resemble that which they signify, for example a simple 'T-intersection' road sign. Cultural icons are icons recognised easily by society, and have become part of the culture, for example the McDonald's restaurant mascot, Ronald McDonald.

Stereotypes and icons are readily used by artists for a variety of reasons. Artists may participate in, or be critical of, the veneration of an icon. They may also be inspired by icons because of the depth of connotations attached to these images. Artists often utilize icons or stereotypes in their work due to their ability to be rapidly deciphered, however, when we analyse an artwork we find that these icons and/or stereotypes are not only intentionally used to communicate the idea, but also reflect the social and cultural environment at the time.

*(A. Lewis 2004, quoted by P. Davis)*

The Adbusters Organisation is an anonymous, non-profit, international organisation of artists, activists and many others who aim to 'topple existing power structures and forge a major shift in the way we live in the 21st century' (Adbusters.org, 9/8/07). The statement above made by Lewis can clearly be seen in a number of Adbusters' works. Adbusters uses different stereotypes and icons, particularly cultural icons, to relay its messages to the general public in simple yet effective ways, often using these images to create subtle but sharp messages about the state of today's society.

One such artwork is *Brand Baby*, a digitally altered photographic image. Often a baby is used in artworks as a symbol of innocence, and Adbusters has used this symbolism to reveal the intended meaning of the artwork. The baby's innocence is reinforced by having it supported by its mother, showing that it cannot support itself. Tattooed all over the baby's body are popular corporate logos, such as McDonalds, Coca-Cola and Nike. The focal point of the artwork is a ring of stars on the mother's breast from which the baby is feeding. This ring represents the stars on the flag of the USA, showing that these American brands all bring similar influences to bear on the youth of today. By using these icons, Adbusters has suggested that as soon as we are born, before we are even able to support ourselves, we are forced to rely on these brands. It also suggests that young people and children are much more susceptible to becoming reliant on the multi-million dollar corporations. Essentially, we are never safe from the 'Brand Bullies' (Klein, 2003), even though we do not always realise it.

*Marlboro Country* is a subtle yet effective artwork in the series also called Marlboro Country, in which Adbusters has used the Marlboro Cowboy stereotype in order to convey an anti-smoking message. Marlboro is a major cigarette company in America, and advertisements for this product have pictured a beautiful, lush countryside through which cowboys were riding their horses. Somewhere in the advertisement the words 'Marlboro Country' would appear, indicating that only Marlboro cigarettes can produce something so alive. Created by digitally altering a photographic image, *Marlboro Country* has used the Marlboro Company's own advertising techniques to relay a message completely

opposite to that on the cigarette packet. The black-and-white image features a single, lonely horse, presumably belonging to a 'Marlboro Cowboy', grazing in a bleak cemetery, surrounded by dead trees. The lifeless images and colours clearly show that the cigarettes are causing death and pain, not life and happiness. Adbusters has kept the iconic text of 'Marlboro Country' unchanged, in order to create a subtle parody of the company. By changing the images but not the text, as well as cynically distorting the Marlboro stereotype, Adbusters has cleverly changed the pro-smoking message on the cigarette packet to an anti-smoking message to be expressed to the public.

Adbusters extend their liberal ideals beyond multi-national corporations, however. The organisation also turns its focus onto environmental issues, in particular the environmental effects of globalisation. One such artwork that focuses on this is *What Was That Bump?*, a computer-generated image. Adbusters has used the iconic image of the earth to 'reflect the social and cultural environment of the time' (Lewis, 2004). The earth is represented as an insignificant, soft ball, not unlike a lump of plasticine or mud. It appears that the earth has been run-over by a vehicle, and is in such a state that it would be impossible to completely fix it: the inspiration for this work was clearly global warming, climate change and such events, as it is unlikely the earth can be fully 'repaired' after such damage has been done. The accompanying text says 'What was that bump?'. This question is as familiar a reference to driving as the images in *Brand Baby* and *Marlboro Country* are references to popularly bought items. The background of the work is blank; this places emphasis on the image of the earth and the tyre-tracks leading up to it. These tracks are powerful symbols of the destructive, man-made car, which clashes with the natural colours and form of the earth. The intended meaning within the work is that we are selfishly destroying, or 'running over' our own planet in trying to make everything easier for ourselves. The tyre tracks and the image of the earth, both easily recognised icons and symbols, have been strategically used to relay a sharp message about the damage humans are doing to the earth.

Adbusters uses many different stereotypes, icons and symbols within its artworks in order to allow them to be easily interpreted. Three such artworks are *Brand Baby*, *Marlboro Country* and *What Was That Bump?*. Through these and other works, Adbusters conveys both subtle and sharp anti-globalisation messages to the public; the very same audience the multi-national corporations target.

## References

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