



Branding The War

Terror and the commodity image

WILLIAM MAZZARELLA

The global telecommunications networks that ensured the immediate ubiquity of the images of the smouldering, collapsing towers (and how quickly the Pentagon was sidelined as spectacle) took only a short breath before the tidal wave of readings, rebuttals, interpretations and framings started pouring in. All of us were struggling with the reflexes that pushed us to make sense of this extraordinary fact in terms of the most ordinary fiction. More generally, many of us were torn between the comforts of the talking cure and a sense of the obscene gulf between the sheer affective shock of the event and the flimsiness of our therapeutic gestures.

The US government was not slow to recognise a marketing opportunity. After all, the most auspicious time for a radical branding intervention is when conventional semiotic closures are forced open, called into question. That is the time when the density of experience and connotation can be channelled into new containers, new packages, and sold at a premium.

Still, in desperate times, all but the most imaginative rulers fall back on nostalgia. Just before September 11, the omens were not encouraging. Introducing his new Undersecretary, advertising veteran Charlotte Beers, Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke thus: "I wanted one of the world's greatest advertising experts, because what are we doing? We're selling. We're selling a product. That product we're selling is democracy. It's the free enter-

prise system, the American value system. It's a product very much in demand". Within days, these words would come to stand as an inauguration of the United States' new wartime diplomacy, a finely tuned and comprehensive effort to 're-brand' the USA.

One measure of the yawning gap between the shock of the event and our prefabricated forms of intelligibility was the sudden ubiquity of the Stars and Stripes: on cars, on doors, on people, in consumer goods advertising. (The pathos of the occasion was such that the Star Spangled Banner even appeared in miniature as a sticker on the bananas in my local supermarket). Apparently an index of collective resolve in the face of adversity, the omnipresence of the flag in fact testified to a generalised disorientation, crying out for the relief of clarity. A symptom of this public longing was that especially those who might be suspected of harbouring doubts about the immediately inevitable war found themselves obliged ostentatiously to express their patriotic engagement. In my own neighbourhood, Chicago's Hyde Park, Ossama's Hair Design swiftly plastered its shop window full of American flags.

In the news media too, the flag functioned as the basis for a branding project, an emotive reduction of ambivalence and multiplicity. To frame their transmissions from the smouldering heap of ruins, each of the networks elaborated its own sub-variant of the larger brand. CBS brought us "America Strikes Back". CNN displayed the dubious alacrity of inserting the ad business' favourite word into its baseline: "America's New War". ABC's version, "A Nation United", expressed the affinity between a certain rhetoric of political solidarity and the drive towards semantic singularity that is characteristic of branding.

But the very logic of this 'New War' – its scornful dismissal of any notion of limitation – made such a drive all the more implausible. The refusal of limits was built into its very name. Military operations have since 1942 been designated according to a formula by which the first part of the name refers to its location, the second to its purpose or aim. Hence, a decade ago, "Desert Storm". It is by now well known that the Dubya administration's first idea for its upcoming campaign, "Infinite Justice", immediately fell foul of US Muslims who objected that only Allah possessed this particular resource. What is perhaps more telling is that both "Infinite Justice" and its successor "Enduring Freedom" conjure a battlefield marked above all by figures of endlessness.

It is into this infinite vista that a new kind of ideological intervention is being projected. The United States Information Agency has, since 1953, operated as a kind of global propaganda machine. Its mandate has been complementary to that of a more conventional diplomacy: to nestle the American Way into the folds and textures of everyday life, by means of 'soft power', in the register of culture. Paving the way for a new kind of intervention, in 1999 the USIA was merged with the State Department. The offspring of this union was a hybrid called 'public diplomacy', an unholy blend of marketing, public relations, and good old-fashioned political rhetoric. Advertising remains an important inspiration in this endeavour. Cultural critics have long been pointing to the blurring of the boundary between politics and marketing, between citizenship and consumerism. Today, the American government is blithely subverting the critique by proudly claiming this blend as its official policy.

"Why do they hate us?" was the question most often aired in the American news media

in the immediate aftermath. Certainly any number of liberal pundits stepped up to the mike to deliver, by way of a response, analyses of American foreign policy during the last fifty years. But they missed the point, because on the home front the very point of departure was that the question had to remain rhetorical. For an American, politics in the sign of public diplomacy, it is crucial that the attacks of September 11 were and must remain incomprehensible, inherently excessive to any attempts at explanation. The implicit approved model for the American citizen-subject here is Forrest Gump: startled, certainly wounded, but ultimately reliant on a proudly naive bedrock of native innocence.

The 1990s had been all about the ideological equation between neo-liberalism and globalisation. On September 11, that equation definitively came unstuck. Retrospectively, a new era emerged, one that stretched from the end of the Cold War in 1989 to the beginning of the Total War in 2001. Paradoxically, however, the new public diplomacy insists on operating in a nostalgic mode. Its formulas are, precisely, those of the Cold War. It is clear that Powell, Beers and their accomplices subscribe to the marketing truism that you cannot be what you are not. You have to play to your strengths, which generally means that you cannot dispense with your established brand properties. So it is that we find the heralds of the new public diplomacy mouthing all the familiar phrases: freedom, tolerance, and democracy, even as they are complicit in abrogating precisely these values in the emergency legislation that the war allows. Discursively, these absolutes are, once again, ranged against a familiar other, this time given an Islamic face: collectivism, fanaticism, and Oriental despotism. Perhaps the clearest difference on this level of public articulation is the overt concern with pursuing the war as a battle for market share, which on the ideological level translates into 'mindshare'.

The logical conclusion is that if the US has made mistakes in the Arab world during the last few decades then it has not been a matter of concrete political interventions. Rather, the crisis is one of communication, of not 'getting the message across' adequately, of failing to 'tell our story'. The recommended response: fine-tune the message and pump up the volume. It is in this spirit that Beers has reportedly considered buying advertising time on Al Jazeera, to compete directly alongside Osama himself. (The so-called 'CNN of the Arab World' is of course hungry for advertising dollars, not least because of the boycott imposed by most of the governments that comprise America's fragile coalition in the Middle East).

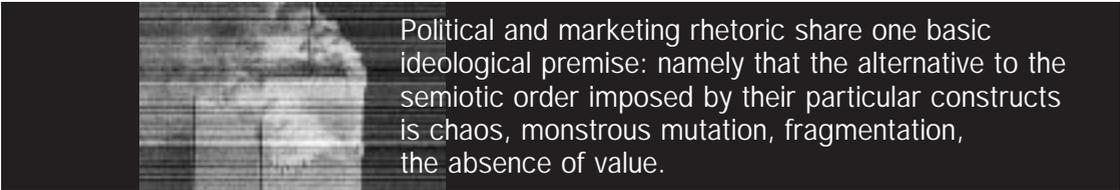
Transplanted into the realm of political rhetoric, the affective logic of the brand survives intact. Says Beers: "An emotional punch is absolutely necessary. If a falling building is seen as just a falling building, the message is lost. If one focuses on the orphans left behind, the people still grieving, the message gets through". This is of course precisely the basis for the obscene contrast in recent US news reportage between the sentimentalised hyper-personalisation of the heroes and victims of the attack in New York and the clinically abstract, remote-controlled visual idiom by which the bombing of Afghanistan is conveyed into American homes.

It is important to note that the migration of marketing logic into the new public diplomacy has been met with considerable skepticism from the advertising business itself. The American trade publication *Advertising Age* reminds us that a prominent practitioner already expressed doubts back in 1961, just as the nuclear stand-off was about to enter one of its

tensest phases: "What about the counter-appeal of the West? It is weak. It is inadequate. Even where our counter-propaganda effort seems ample, it is often irrelevant to the immediate self-interest of its target audience". The business has, in other words, long suspected that while Corn Flakes and democracy may be coupled on a semiotic level, they remain rather different kinds of use-values.

In the days immediately following September 11, America was pitched into a strange and frightening state: an uncanny absence of advertising. It couldn't last. Soon enough, the corporations returned, draped with awkward solemnity in the Stars and Stripes. Some, like Tommy Hilfiger, decided temporarily to replace literally eroticised imagery with a more sublimated variant: the fetish of home, community, and tradition. Others saw less circuitous routes between what remained of their consumers' libidinal urges and the cash register. One fashion designer reflected in the press that a look of sexy vulnerability was 'very now'. In the final analysis, however, the new patriotism sat awkwardly with most of corporate America. The problem was that the glib multiculturalism of the United Colors of Benetton, always suspect to be sure, no longer had any credibility whatsoever.

Some might think that this is merely a structural impasse of advertising, of the subordination of the image to the logic of capital. But this would be fundamentally to misunderstand advertising and marketing as a mode of public cultural intervention. It is true that the logic that animates the production of commodity images is always subordinated to the tyranny of 'the bottom line'. But it is equally true that the material out of which these images are assembled far exceeds the instrumental aims of particular campaigns or individual sales pitches. This material, these images and texts, is deeply imbricated in the public fields of connotation and embodiment that all of us inhabit in our various ways. And so the



impasses of advertising are, to be sure, indicative of the limitations of a commercially constituted public sphere. But they are *also* suggestive of the kinds of creative political engagements that we can imagine on the basis of our own locations within contemporary media ecologies.

These are engagements that are founded neither upon a commitment to some transparent ideal of discursive communication, nor upon a lucid insistence on free-floating signifiers. Images *do* have a political economy, but to the same extent political economies must be understood as imaginary. The point is to grasp the dialectical articulation of affect and discourse, image and text at each of its sites – whether corporate, intimate, disciplinary or subversive. Only when we understand its local determinations, its historical imbrications, will we be in a position to intervene creatively.

Political and marketing rhetoric share one basic ideological premise: namely that the alternative to the semiotic order imposed by their particular constructs is chaos, monstrous mutation, fragmentation, the absence of value. On this level, the role of the Internet in the post-September 11 period has been instructive. The obverse of the interminable series of judiciously authoritative statements by 'major intellectuals' has of course been the wild profusion of rumour, the trade in counterfeit images, the rampant hypertextualisation of the meaning of the event and its aftermath. This much one would have expected of the Internet. But what is perhaps more interesting is that the spectre of 'terror' has made the rest of the public sphere behave in an analogous way.

Of course the initial attacks were virtuosic in their spectacular execution. Tailor-made for prime-time television, their symbolic logic was crudely overdetermined. But in the weeks that followed, the logic of terror came into its own. Particularly in the wake of the anthrax scare (not least the palpable anxiety associated with its unfathomable origin) it was as if the entire terrain of everyday life became fertile ground for a promiscuous and ungovernable semiotics. Suddenly the Achilles' Heel, the crucial fault-line, was everywhere and anywhere. The most improbable rumour about possible future attacks seemed all at once eminently logical, diabolically ingenious.

The landed symbolic authority of the 'legitimate' state and the ostentatiously fleet-footed 'illegitimacy' of the terrorist network confront each other at once as parodic mirror images and as competitors for market share. Mediated by the unstable structure of the commodity image, each of them illuminates one side of its dialectical process: semantic closure and affective disorder. By the same token, we come to understand that the commodity image is indexical of a wider public cultural field, one in which exchange-value is not the final arbiter. Indeed, if there is one small consolation in all this sickening violence, all this lethal posturing, then it is perhaps that the real stakes and means of our possible public interventions have become so nakedly visible precisely because formal politics has been driven to such an intensity of caricature.