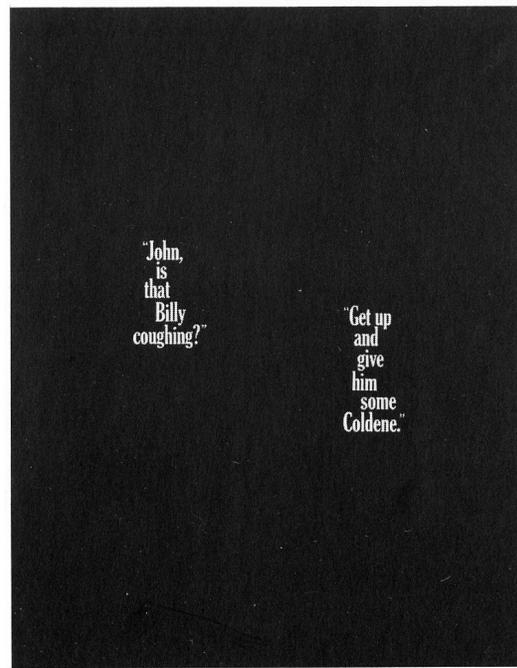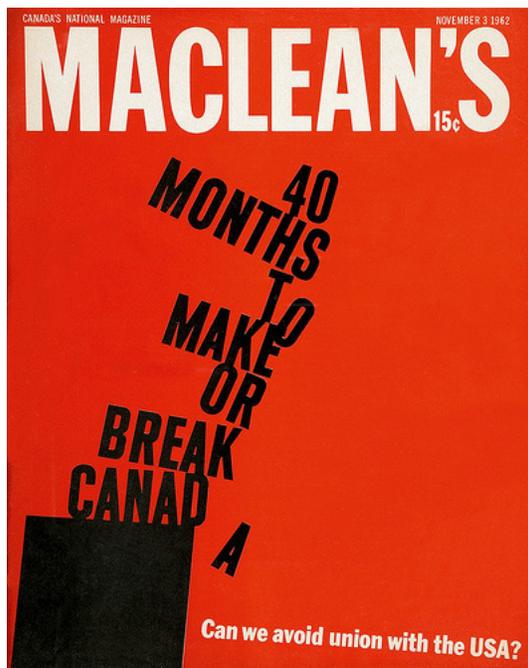# Verbus and the Big Idea

By Nick Shinn, 2010

VERBUS AND THE BIG IDEA

Allan Fleming wielded the modernist axe to great effect, clearing space, paring elements to a minimum, cutting down on variables. In his November 3rd, 1962, *Macleans* cover design, '40 MONTHS TO MAKE OR BREAK CANADA' there are no pictures, just type. The colours are black, white and red. The headline is all caps in a bold condensed sans serif face, similar to the nameplate. The price is tucked neatly below the apostrophe in the nameplate. The layout is asymmetric, with copious white (red) space. Such minimalism could be seen as reductive, compared to the normal clutter which, then as now, satisfies the suits that all the right buttons are being pushed, but is better understood as a strong concept that doesn't need tarting up. The modernist provenance of Fleming's layout is decidedly retro, referencing the New Typography of thirty years before, in which the equivalence of purely graphic elements and typographic features was asserted; Lissitzky's politically charged *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* of course, as well as, for instance, the *Kiki* poster by Tschichold, in which the large dot of "i" is picked out in a different colour from the stem of the letter, identifying it as a disk; likewise, the black square in the *Macleans* cover preps the viewer for the idea that the letters it supports have two modes of meaning.

That same year, Fleming's New York contemporary George Lois created another minimalist marvel, a cough syrup ad in which the mother and father of a sleepless child briefly converse in the middle of the night, represented by their words in white Cheltenham Bold against a black background. An abstraction of a comic strip panel, speech balloons without the balloons. Again, no pictures, just two snatches of plain, bold type and lots of taut, solidly inked space.

Both are works which leverage the typographically-informed vocabulary of modernism, best known in North America from trade magazine and book images of European posters, to aggressively assert the role of creative genius in mass-market commercial publications: Hey, they say, I don't need a picture of the product/subject, I don't need a slick logo or any corporate style, decoration or rote formats, all I need is one workhorse font which I'll use in a simply unique, off-kilter yet meticulously precise layout, to create awesome meaning from next to nothing. While the most spartan, rigorous graphic modernism is generally identified as a European import, by 1962 it had been established in North America for over 30 years, with its own tradition; marginal, certainly—usually catering to an artistic demographic—but so it was too in Europe. People like Fleming and Lois took it mainstream.

There is a significant conceptual difference between the magazine cover and the ad.

Fleming makes you look at the type, as was his wont: type becomes picture, crafted letter by letter. He removes the need for a photo or illustration by making the type do double duty

as conveyor of both text and image. It is a technique which he exemplified in two of the best-known Canadian logos of the 20th century, where corporate initials were configured to represent company business: CN (1960–), in which he replaced the quaint pseudo-heraldic mark—'CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS', three lines of underlined caps centred on a red maple leaf—by hacking away twenty-two letters to leave C and N, now forming a continuous monoline in the simple geometry of a railroad track; and Ontario Hydro* (1962–1999), where O and H were overlapped to represent a two-pronged Canadian electrical plug.

As visual rhetoric, this is conjugation, a bringing together of language and that to which it refers, visual onomatopoeia (the use of words whose sounds correspond with their semantic value). It is somewhat like a rebus puzzle; in a rebus the picture of an object signifies text, a letter or syllable. But this is the other way around, with the graphic arrangement of letters symbolising a thing, either representational or abstract. The Latin word rebus (the ablative plural of *res*) means "by things", so this device of Fleming's may be termed *litteris* "by letters". But perhaps it should be better referred to by the slightly less accurate *verbus*.

Lois, and other practitioners of the Big Idea (no need for a fancy term there) didn't want you to look at the type, no matter how large they made it. Its appearance was immaterial, a point attested by the fact that the cough syrup ad may be conjured here quite adequately by words alone. Lois et al downplayed the display qualities of headlines, other than nice kerning (the purpose of which was to avoid any attention that awkward spacing may cause). They wanted the headline to be an *objet trouvé* snippet of text type, informal and conversational, a quote of friendly adspeak, that merely happened to have been blown up in size, retaining its 'U&lc, paragraph indent, flushleft' spec more often than not. The asymmetricality of such settings was instrumental in the modernist layout. The Big Idea made a zen puzzle of the relationship between text and image, the solution of which, the grasping of a disembodied concept hovering between and about both, engaged, rewarded, and enthralled the reader.

Earlier, in posters starting in the 1930s, Abram Games had also employed what he called "maximum meaning, minimum means" to involve the viewer in the message: "I wind the spring and the public, in looking at the poster, will have that spring released in its mind." But Games, despite being an accomplished lettering artist, was at heart surrealist not typographer; the doubling in his work did not involve text, rather, two objects morphed into one another— for instance, a man with brolly and briefcase becoming the *Financial Times* he is reading.

There was cachet in pulling off the no-product-shot, no-logo ad, acknowledged by one's peers in creative competitions. Part of the trick was getting it by one's boss and signed off by the

client; it certainly helped if the creative director was the boss. My first agency job was working for the much-awarded Raymond Lee agency. Ray was a master of the Big Idea. I recall a transit stop ad of his from 1980: Full bleed shot of a man's naked feet, one over the other in a coy pose, the background dark and a large three-line headline, in Goudy Bold U&lc, white, flush left, paragraph indent: "Pity the poor soles with no MacGregor socks". Now that's a pun.

So while one well-known trend of the 1950s and '60s involved profusive eclecticism—and Fleming was no stranger to this—at the same time there existed this sophisticated pictorial-literary genre informed by the wit of brevity. The Big Idea lasted well into the 1980s.

Graphic minimalism is a question of manners, of typographic behaviour appropriate to context. In *The Visible Word*, (University of Chicago, 1994) Johanna Drucker distinguishes between marked and unmarked text,

> Gutenberg's bibles are the archetype of the unmarked text, the text in which the words on the page "appear to speak for themselves" without the visible intervention of author or printer ... the literary text is the single grey block of undisturbed text, seeming, in the graphic sense, to have appeared whole and complete.

> Any text assumes a reader and marks that assumption to some extent. [Unmarked texts] attempt to efface the traces of that assumption. The marked text by contrast aggressively situates the reader ... with manipulative utilization of the strategies of graphic design.

While Drucker clearly associates the unmarked text with literature and the marked text with advertising, it's safe to say that the same distinction exists between editorial and advertising text. Going further, there are two kinds of advertising text, recognized as early as 1917 by Gilbert P. Farrar in *Typography of Advertising that Pays* (Appleton) as the Forceful Educational Style (marked) and the Passive Educational Style (unmarked), described thus:

> When there are no headlines [and usually, be it noted, no logo] the reader reads the entire advertisement or he does not read any part of it, and this very fact causes the copy to get a reading from the better class of readers.

Consider that social dimension. Among other things, the 1960s Big Idea marked a change in the operational procedure of the Madison Avenue ad agency; if once the copywriter had slipped the copy under the art director's door, now they worked together chasing the magnificent concept that synergised text and visual. This team practice was implemented by Allan Fleming when he took charge of the creative department at Toronto's Maclaren Advertising in 1965, abolishing separate offices for writers and art directors.

Thus, while the ostensible purpose of commercial work is to appeal to readers and consumers, it is also affected by the working circumstances of art directors and graphic designers. The Big Idea was a product of the mid-century ad agency, Verbus of the design studio. In both workplaces, these constituted a sophisticated, aspirational modus operandi tuned as much

to the metaculture of the trade—one's peers—as to the end user. The Art Directors Club of Toronto (now the ADCC) was formed in 1948, and the Society of Typographic Designers of Canada (now the GDC) in 1957. Their model, the New York Art Directors Club, was founded in 1920, and had since the 1930s been publishing an annual of award-winning ads and brochures, crediting agencies, copywriters, art directors, illustrators and photographers by name.

What happened when smart, driven, artistic people from humble backgrounds chose to pursue a career in a socially-despised line of work, characterised in the mass media as Hucksters and Hidden Persuaders, and amongst the intelligensia (Marcuse, Debord, Adorno, &c.) as the psychic slavemasters of late capitalism? Well yeah, certain sectors of the advertising and design world were indeed deserving of the opprobrium. I once worked for a fellow, bless his heart, who made an ad for pipe tobacco featuring a blonde wearing nothing but a Mountie's jacket. Some kind of rhetorical figure, no doubt. The old guard didn't get it, they dreamed of quitting the biz and becoming 'real' artists.

Professionalization and respect, that's what happened. The young moderns took the high road in the here and now. Big Idea art directors with discreet, unmarked typography, and graphic designers with Verbus, marking their work as more than message bearer, as something worth looking at in its own right. The well-read Fleming made a name for himself at Cooper and Beatty, Canada's top type house in the late 1950s, honing his skills, defining his style in awfully clever award-winning promotions targeting the design trade, which he both wrote and designed, compounding the entanglement of his relationships with text and image. Taking the instigation a step further, he organized exhibitions of work by, for instance, Saul Bass, at the firm's gallery, and taught typography at Ontario College of Art.

On many fronts, the notion arrived that mass media was culture too. First recognized by academia in the late '60s, 'popular culture' had been the subject matter of pop art throughout the decade. Conceptual art also emerged then, typified, one might say, in the pages of the journal *Art-Language*. In a similar vein, Verbus and the Big Idea addressed the conceptual artefact, deconstructed the barrier between fine art and mass communication, and defined a creative pinnacle in literary-driven print culture, which was at its peak (in terms of periodical revenue and circulation) in the 1960s.

—Nick Shinn, May 2010

*Hydro is a Canadian name for electricity, due to industry origins in hydro-electric generation.