

# Graphic propaganda

## Cultural expressions in time of war

by Nick Shinn

The media is a battlefield where moral systems collide. Ownership tilts it. TV channels and newspapers in the U.S. promote their business interests by supporting a pro-big business government and its war. Even THE NEW YORK TIMES, which opposed invading Iraq without UN consent, did so in a way unlikely to rock the boat—and clearly in direct contrast to the intention of Britain’s DAILY MIRROR.

The MIRROR’s front page, designed to generate news-box sales by aggressively engaging the man in the street, is as pointed and artistically crafted as an editorial cartoon. On March 14th, Tony Blair leered at the world from the MIRROR’s cover, the sticker “PRIME MONSTER” plastered across his forehead. No doubt the photo is “real”, but the top light gives him a dusting of eye shadow, and the saturation slider has been pushed a little too far, powdering his cheeks with blush and pinkening up the lips—the makeup of a pantomime villain, the flush of a roué. Removing the highlight in one eye becomes the final act of character assassination.

On March 24th, the MIRROR’s front page (“Still anti-war?”) showed two victims of the war. In North America, such photos of “collateral damage” are confined to inside pages. This culture, which glorifies splatter in movies and video games, shies away from carnage in news media, presenting the war as a grand game of leaders, generals, military equipment, and explosions.

The suppression of horror is complete in the ads that invited the “silent majority” to an April 4th *Rally for America* in Toronto (“Now it’s time for the Silent Majority of Canadians to speak up!”). No mention of a war—the important thing is we don’t want to piss off our biggest trading partner. The Friends of America (started by a small group of successful businessmen) who organized this rally described themselves as “a wide, non-profit coalition of concerned individuals”. The April 5th Toronto anti-war march was publicized by Coalition to Stop the War, “supported by over 40 labour, faith, community and cultural organizations”.

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**We've heard from the protesters & critics**

**Now it's time for the  
Silent Majority  
of Canadians to  
speak up!**

**RALLY FOR AMERICA**

**Friday, April 4th, 2003  
12 noon  
Nathan Phillips Square, Toronto**  
(Osgoode or Queen subway stations)

Join us for a peaceful rally to show that we love, respect & support our friends, neighbours and allies.

Please bring American & Canadian flags if possible.

**www.friendsofamerica.ca**  
Organized by FRIENDS OF AMERICA  
a wide, non-profit coalition of concerned individuals

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**mass rally & march for peace**

**STOP  
BUSH'S  
MAD WAR**

**Saturday April 5  
12 noon  
Dundas Square**  
(at corner of Bloor and Dundas)

followed by a mass peace  
march through Toronto, to  
join up with the healthcare  
caravan to demand:

**HEALTHCARE NOT WARFARE**

**healthcare not warfare**  
called by: **COALITION to STOP the WAR**  
SUPPORTED BY OVER 40 LABOUR, FAITH, COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS  
FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT WWW.COALITIONTOSTOPTHEWAR.CA OR CALL 910-8088



"I was in despair. Deep despair. I drew myself: the representative of an individual in despair, with hands palm outstretched outwards and downwards in the manner of Goya's peasant before the firing squad. I formalised the drawing into a line and put a circle round it." — Gerald Holtom, designer of the peace symbol, 1958

The tombstone layout of the pro-war ad combines with its attractive stock imagery, name branding, and institutionally bossy Extra Bold Sans Serif typeface, creating a solid, conservative tone that speaks with authority, motivating by style rather than content. By contrast, the anti-war poster ("Stop Bush's Mad War") is a disturbing design: asymmetric and crammed—from the dramatic press photos to the captions to the big slogans to the carefully squared-off main text box, it throws the reader's eyes around, driving home its argument. With a nod to contemporary styles, the designer puts all-lowercase white bold sans serif names in round-cornered

black bars, but keeps the overall typography un-designy by choosing Microsoft's Arial and Trebuchet as the fonts. Despite the aggressive layout, Trebuchet is a friendly face—its caps have quaint Gill-like proportions, and its lowercase is soft and round.

Online, big business loses some of its political clout. Friends and acquaintances exchange amusements via email attachments, and this is how I've come to receive various anti-war "graphics",

mostly satirical in nature (perhaps there are pro-war attachments going the rounds, but no one sends them to me). The satirical retro poster is the killer genre. The best are painfully on point: "I'm fighting for Whitey" (from [www.whitehouse.org](http://www.whitehouse.org)) puts U.S. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice in uniform, highlighting the disproportionate number of blacks in US front-line troops. "We'll take care of the axis of evil..." blithely lists the rules of a fascist state—"A message from the Ministry of Homeland Security". The genre is heavily ironic, its loving parody of retro-Americana pop culture not far removed from the graphic look of Old Navy, or a Munsinger ad.

Tony Sutton takes the opposite approach. At ColdType.net he collects and re-sets the newspaper columns of journalists such as Robert Fisk, Norman Solomon and Antonia Zerbisias, creating books-in-progress that can be downloaded as PDF files. His unaffected typography is strong, precise and articulate, a pleasure to read on screen or printed out.

There's a huge range of graphic techniques on view in the signs carried by protest marchers. What could be more hardcore than some wisecrack slogan ("Bombing for peace..." and "Die blutspur der USA...") that took five seconds to scrawl—the speed



of reading matches the speed of execution, the reader reliving the gestural conviction of the writer. Stencils and adhesive lettering (“The war is not about oil...” and “A village in Texas has lost its idiot!”) have an earnest, laboriously physical quality; the amateur spacing gives a grassroots authenticity.

Most of the signs at pro-war protests are production runs, supplied by the organizers; at anti-war protests, one-off home-made signs predominate. Many are computer-generated, few by professional graphic artists. They are none the worse for it, however, with a simplicity and directness (“Land of the Free?” and “How did OUR oil...”) that frequently eludes the pro.

Within any protest march there is a mixture of philosophies and agendas. The distinction between being against Bush’s War and being for peace is significant. The quality of peace is shown in signs that are delicately drawn, brightly colored, picturing a dove or the peace symbol (“I vote for polititians...”).

The peace symbol was designed in England in 1958 as the logo for the newly formed Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Its designer, Gerald Holtom, had been a conscientious objector during World War II and was a professional graphic designer and artist. Intentionally, the symbol has never been copyrighted; in

the U.K. its meaning is still associated with the CND, but it has spread elsewhere as a generic sign of peace.

Prior to the invasion, the U.S. “bombed” Iraqi soldiers with clouds of propaganda leaflets. The mediocrity of their design (“Do not risk your life” and “The Medina RGFC has been targeted for destruction.”) has puzzled Western pundits.

The problem is that we know nothing of Iraqi visual culture. Is the quality of Iraqi graphics bad or good—or do we just think it’s bad because it’s Arabic? Are the U.S. leaflets intended to adopt the vernacular style of Iraqi graphics, and if so, are they a good imitation or bad? Are they poorly designed because the military’s graphic designers think Iraqis have no taste or because this is the best that military hacks could do? Or is it because the designers had an impossible client? Then again, perhaps these designs are brilliantly Post-modern—they’d look pretty chill in a Diesel ad.

It’s unclear whether the flyer drops have had the desired effect, but it’s unlikely. The military was a little out of its depth on this; “Quit or die” has a woeful track record as an advertising strategy. One has to wonder why didn’t they bring in the *really* big guns—from Madison Avenue. After all, hasn’t U.S. marketing done a far better job of conquering the world than the U.S. military? 🌐