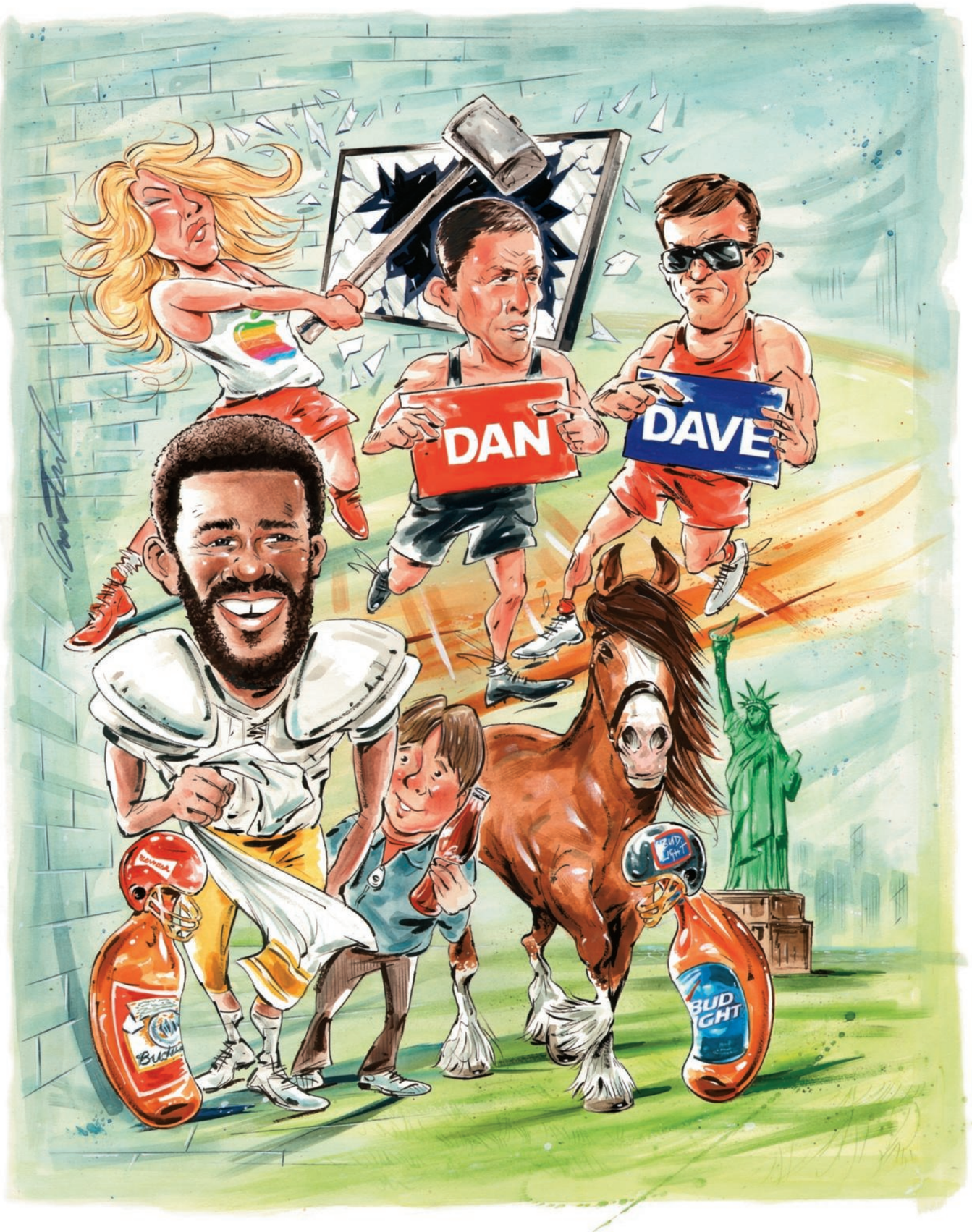

Super Bowl 50 The Commercials

George Orwell, Budway Joe and Ling Ling the Impolitic Panda

A LOOK BACK AT HALF A CENTURY OF SUPER BOWL COMMERCIALS REVEALS JUST HOW MUCH ADVERTISING'S PLACE IN THE GAME HAS GROWN

By
Chris Nashawaty

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The story is so telling that it's become one of the cornerstones of Steve Jobs's legacy. It was the spring of 1983, and his company, Apple, had spent the previous four years designing and developing its top-secret Macintosh, the first mass-market personal computer featuring a mouse, a graphical user interface and a whopping 128 kilobytes of RAM. Sleep-deprived and under pressure to meet a launch date of Jan. 24, 1984, the 28-year-old still had the savvy to realize that he needed a clarion blast of a TV commercial heralding the new device's rollout—something that matched both the revolutionary potential of the product and his vision of himself as Cupertino's resident Zen bomb-thrower. "I want something that will stop people in their tracks," Jobs ordered. "I want a thunderclap."

He'd get it.

Apple's ad agency at the time was Chiat/Day, a cutting-edge creative hotbed whose Venice Beach, Calif., office was run by a shaggy, bearded savant named Lee Clow. While Jobs wasn't always an easy personality to get along with, he and Clow were simpatico souls—antiestablishment visionaries who believed they were subverting corporate America from within. After weeks of brainstorming, Clow and his Mac team settled on a cheeky riff on George Orwell's future-shock literary classic, *1984*, with the playful tagline: ". . . See why 1984 won't be like *1984*." They sketched out storyboards for a 60-second TV spot, a mini sci-fi epic featuring a young woman rising up against the evil Thought Police (a not-so-subtle swipe at Apple's Big Brother

competitor, IBM) by hurling a sledgehammer into a giant screen broadcasting a numbing mind-control speech to the masses. All their ad needed was someone with the filmmaking chops to conjure the spot's Orwellian vibe and visual palette. It couldn't be just another TV commercial, it had to be . . . *art*. And it had to be ready in time to air during Super Bowl XVIII on Jan. 22.

Ridley Scott didn't start directing feature films until he was almost 40. Before that, the Royal College of Art graduate had built his reputation producing and directing commercials. But by mid-1983 he was one of Hollywood's most in-demand directors, having helmed the one-two punch of *Alien* and *Blade Runner*. It was the latter film, set in a dystopian future where androids and humans are hard to tell apart, that convinced Clow that Scott was the man to sell Apple's personal-computing revolution to a public that didn't yet know it absolutely *had to have* that $2,495 beige box. The only question: Why would an A-list movie director want to go back to advertising?

"After something like 1,500 commercials, I thought I'd earned the right to just make movies," says Scott, whose latest film, *The Martian*, was nominated last month for a Best Picture Oscar. "I'd served my time." Or so he believed—until he received a one-page fax from Clow: the script for the *1984* ad. "I called Lee and asked, What's Apple? They said it was a computer, and all I could think at the time was, So what? Who needs a machine to write shopping lists? What's the matter with a pad and a pencil? How wrong I was."

Any misgivings that Scott held were eased by the fact that the product was nowhere to be seen in the proposed ad. "That was immediately attractive to me," he recalls. "I like advertising to have a bit of mystery. All they had was that line at the end about *1984*. That was risky stuff. How many people out there even knew about George Orwell?"

More than three decades later, budget figures for that 60-second spot are hazy, ranging from $200,000 to $1.5 million. "They knew I wanted to do it, so they really cut my balls off on the budget," chuckles Scott, who puts the figure at $250,000 for a two-day shoot at England's Shepperton Studios. To help save money, he even wrangled 200 extras—local National Front skinheads—to play the commercial's pasty drones.

When Jobs first saw the *1984* ad, he flipped. To him, it both captured the essence of spiritual liberation that he believed the personal-computing revolution promised, and it spread the gospel that Apple was a different kind of company—a band of cyberpunk pirates taking on the Man.

APPLE, *1984*

Anya Major, the English actress who slings a sledgehammer through a screen, was actually an established discus thrower.

Then, one month before the Super Bowl, he proudly showed it to Apple's board. They hated it. They hated it so much, in fact, that they demanded Chiat/Day sell off the two spots they had purchased (one for 30 seconds, one for a minute) and get their money back. "All I heard was that Apple didn't get it," says Scott. "I thought, Why not? Because it's pretty f----- great."

Jobs was crushed. Then, late one night, he played it for the only other person whose opinion he trusted, Apple cofounder Steve Wozniak. Woz, as the legend goes, thought it was so cool that he offered to reach into his own pocket and put up half the $800,000 cost of airing the 60-second ad if Jobs matched him.

In the end it didn't come to that. In a sly bit of defiance—let's call it what it was, lying—Chiat/Day told Apple's board that they'd tried selling the two spots back to CBS but could only unload the 30-second slot. That left them with the longer vacancy, which they'd never even tried to sell.

On Jan. 22, 1984, shortly after the Raiders' Marcus Allen scored on the first of two third-quarter TD runs against the Redskins in what was quickly turning into a blowout, TV screens from Bangor to Burbank went dark for a full second. Then, Scott's bleak black-and-white tableau of ashy-complexioned industrial workers ominously marching in lockstep unspooled for 78 million viewers. There were no sexy sports cars. No easy-on-the-eyes models drinking perspiring bottles of Coke in slo-mo. If anything, Apple's ad was proof that the revolution would be televised after all.

THE IRONY is that despite the buzz around that *1984* spot, it didn't sell many computers. It's hard to fathom now, but the original Mac was a bust. Still, the ad was a watershed moment in the history of Super Bowl commercials. Until then America's biggest, most recognizable brands had been content to simply re-air existing ads during the Big Game. But *1984* raised the bar forever. Brands immediately began demanding that their ad agencies produce buzz-building spots made exclusively for the Super Bowl—spots that might air only once but that folks would talk about on Monday.

YOUTUBE.COM (2)

"I HEARD APPLE DIDN'T GET IT," SCOTT SAYS OF HIS 1984 AD.

"I THOUGHT, WHY NOT? IT'S PRETTY F------ GREAT."

Just like that, the Super Bowl was not only the NFL's marquee event—it was Madison Avenue's, too.

Fast-forward 32 years and a 30-second commercial airing during Super Bowl 50 costs somewhere in the neighborhood of $5 million. That four-hour block in early February has turned into the ritziest television real estate of the year, ahead of even the Oscars—and it's not even close. "Apple's *1984* commercial was the switch that flipped everything," says former *New York Times* advertising columnist Stuart Elliott. "That's when viewers became conditioned to expect new, special, different commercials during the game—commercials that had bigger ideas on their minds than just, *Buy our potato salad*."

When you think about it, it makes perfect sense: As viewership becomes more and more fragmented and programming becomes more and more targeted, the Super Bowl is one of the last mass-audience events left on TV. It's not just football fans who watch; it sometimes feel like an unofficial American holiday—a unique once-a-year national assembly bringing together our increasingly secular, pop-culture-obsessed citizenry. "For advertisers it's the closest thing you ever get to a captive audience," says Elliott. "People don't fast-forward through the commercials because they watch the game live and they watch it in groups. After 50 Super Bowls they've also come to know that if they stop talking during the commercials, they'll be rewarded with some sort of clever or funny or sentimental commercial. As an advertiser it's where you want to be."

So how did we get here? While *1984* is a huge part of the answer, it's still only a part. Further back, in the earliest days of the Super Bowl, the biggest consumer brands certainly understood the game's power to reach millions of potential customers. But each January they'd trot out the same old ads, whether it was Noxzema hawking its shaving cream with the help of Joe Namath and Farrah Fawcett ("Let Noxzema cream your face") or those perennial Motor City stalwarts, Ford and Chevy.

This was the toddler-learning-to-walk stage of Super Bowl commercials. Perhaps the first ad among this early set to resonate on a deeper emotional level was Coca-Cola's famous Mean Joe Greene spot. Although it had aired several times before 1980's Super Bowl XIV (a game which serendipitously pitted Greene's Steelers against the Rams), that 60-second commercial reached new heights of three-hankie sentimentality. Greene was on his last legs as a player (and would retire one year later), but over the course of his career—which included five All-Pro nods—the 6' 4", 275-pound defensive tackle had earned a reputation as the most imposing member of Pittsburgh's Steel Curtain defense. So when his lawyer told him that Coke wanted him for a heartstring-tugging national commercial, he didn't quite know what to think.

"I really contemplated not doing it," says Greene, 36 years later. "Not so much because it went against the 'Mean Joe' thing, but because acting wasn't exactly my comfort zone."

Ultimately, some arm-twisting from his advisers convinced Greene that he would be nuts to turn down such a high-profile opportunity. He reluctantly flew to Mount Vernon, N.Y., to shoot the spot, which begins with a wounded Greene limping down a tunnel, hanging his head, until a fawning young fan offers a bottle of Coke. Greene downs the soda in one mammoth swig and, in the end, tosses the kid his game jersey. "Wow! Thanks, Mean Joe!" Then the button line, *Have a Coke and a smile*.

Unseen in the final cut: Greene's wrestling with the effects of a day's worth of soda-swigging. "I drank a lot of Coke that day," recalls the Hall of Famer. "And those were the large 16-ounce bottles. The 10-ounce bottles we started with, my hands were too big and they engulfed the bottle." When the cameras finally started rolling—after several rehearsals and several drained Cokes—the big man couldn't stop burping as he delivered his lines.

COCA-COLA, *HEY KID, CATCH!*

In 2015, Coke dusted off its ad for the first time in 15 years, airing it during a throwback-themed NASCAR race, the Bojangles' Southern 500.

COURTESY OF COCA-COLA (2)

The commercial was a national sensation, the closest thing to a viral ad in a pre-Internet era, not only because of the cognitive disconnect (Greene's fearsome rep versus the big-hearted pussycat in the spot) but also because it just made people feel good—about celebrity athletes, about Coca-Cola, about America. "The idea of this big rough-and-tough guy and this little kid had a 'Kumbaya' aspect to it," says Elliott. "Not to mention that this was a black football player and a white kid. That wasn't the kind of thing [advertisers showed] back then very much."

In the months after the (belch-free) ad played out to an audience of 76 million during the Super Bowl, Greene was shocked to see old ladies and pint-sized kids alike walking up to him, offering him their Cokes, asking for autographs. After a decade cracking skulls, Mean Joe Greene was suddenly Mr. Softy.

Of course Greene was hardly the last professional athlete to stiffly sell products on TV. From Michael Jordan and Larry Bird's epic game of H-O-R-S-E (Super Bowl XXVII, 1993) to David Beckham's tighty-whitied Blue Steel poses (SB XLVI, 2012), sometimes it feels as if every running back, rebounder and rightfielder has a SAG card.

IF THERE was a lesson to be learned from Apple's *1984* spot, it wasn't simply that Super Bowl ads could be edgy and cryptic and cinematic. It was also that brands could grab the public's fickle attention span by airing ads specifically created for the Super Bowl—ads that may not even run again. For exhibit A you need only look five years down the line.

In 1988, after a lopsided 42–10 Redskins trouncing of the Broncos in Super Bowl XXII, Anheuser-Busch scion August Busch III had a novel idea. Because the game had been such a blowout, viewers didn't bother to stick around long enough to see Budweiser's second-half ads. Since he had no control over the competitiveness of the game, Busch wondered, What if we created a series of Super Bowl ads, one in each quarter of the game, that actually forced people to stay tuned—a game to go along with the game?

Anheuser-Busch's longtime ad agency, D'Arcy Masius Benton & Bowles, took Busch's marching orders and came up with . . . *the Bud Bowl*. A series of five 30-second spots pitting anthropomorphic bottles of Bud and Bud Light against one another in a corny, punfestooned, stop-motion-animated football game, the Bud Bowl, as pitched, would become its own event. In addition to the already-steep cost of the ads—$675,000 for each of four 30-second spots—August ponied up an extra $3 million to NBC and the NFL to become the exclusive beer sponsor of the game. Meanwhile, to further guarantee that viewers stuck around even if the game turned into a rout (and to sell a tsunami of suds in the lead-up), Busch's in-house marketing team came up with a sweepstakes to accompany the blitzkrieg of Bud Bowl spots: In the months leading up to Super Bowl XXIII, every Bud and Bud Light 12-pack included an official scorecard; drinkers were to follow the game at home, writing down the Bud Bowl score at the end of each quarter, with the chance to win $100,000. Sales went through the roof.

As juvenile and groan-inducing as Bud Bowl I was (players celebrated with "high-sixes"; one kicker was named Budski), in terms of pure advertising it was a smash. Anheuser-Busch sold beer so briskly that the Bud Bowl franchise was kept alive until 1997, when the public's interest finally went flat. In fact, the buzz leading up to that debut Bud Bowl in '89 was so feverish that *USA Today* capitalized on the opportunity to create its Super Bowl Ad Meter, polling the public's reaction to the Big Game's commercials and grading them from best to worst. Says Elliott, who worked at *USA Today* at the time, "The idea that an advertiser as big as Anheuser-Busch was making such a commitment and went through that much expense was a signal to a lot of other advertisers that they should look to the Super Bowl as a special spotlight opportunity.

"When the Ad Meter started, it really said something that one of the nation's biggest national newspapers was using the same polling resources for these commercials that they used for presidential elections." Overnight, how we felt about Super Bowl commercials became quantifiable. They were the new box office.

One can understand how a prospective advertiser taking this all in could reach the conclusion that despite the enormous costs, shoot-the-moon ad gambits couldn't miss. That conclusion, of course, would have been wrong. Three years after Bud Bowl I, in the build-up to the 1992 Summer Olympics, Reebok launched a similarly splashy series of commercials during Super Bowl XXVI featuring a pair of telegenic American decathletes, Dan O'Brien and Dave Johnson. Ostensibly the spots were selling the company's Pump Graphlite cross-training sneaker, its latest attempt to steal some of Nike's market share. But what they were really selling was a contrived, cooked-up rivalry between two guys no one had ever heard of before.

O'Brien and Johnson were the two biggest favorites to win the decathlon in Barcelona—the only question was, Who would take home the gold and who would settle for silver? That January, while the Redskins crushed the Bills in Minneapolis, Reebok filled the airwaves with five expensive stars-and-stripes spots featuring grainy home-movie footage of the two hopefuls as little kids while a stentorian narrator rattled off their accomplishments. ("Dan can run the hundred meters in 10.3 seconds. . . . Dave can high-jump 6' 10¾". . . .") *Dan or Dave—who'll be the world's greatest athlete?*

Then the unthinkable happened. Five weeks before the Games, O'Brien missed the pole vault three times at the U.S. trials in New Orleans. He wouldn't even travel to Spain. Johnson *did* make the team, but with a stress fracture in his left foot, he barely managed to win bronze. The campaign was a colossal flop—the New Coke of Super Bowl ads.

WHILE THE teams (mostly) change from year to year, there's a remarkable consistency to the pomp and pageantry surrounding the NFL's marquee event. Super Bowl commercials, on the other hand, are less predictable, always changing. From the quaint catchphrase-coining biddies for Wendy's ("Where's the Beef?") in the mid-1980s to GoDaddy's jiggle-shock sexism in the mid-2000s to Clint Eastwood's postrecession *Halftime in America* spot for Chrysler in '12, they tend to reflect the culture in a way that the game doesn't.

ANHEUSER-BUSCH, *BUD BOWL I*

Bud won six of eight games over Bud Light—but not always honestly. In one win, they employed a crane and blimp to stop the winning TD.

HOLIDAY INN/AP; BOB JOHNSON; YOUTUBE.COM (HAMMER)

YOUTUBE.COM (4)

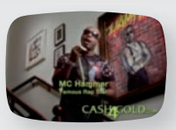
Blind Spots

LET'S NOT PRETEND THAT EVERY SUPER BOWL COMMERCIAL BEATS WITH JOE GREENE'S HEART, THAT BEHIND EVERY AD THERE'S A BUDDING RIDLEY SCOTT. HERE, THE LEAST-SUPER MADISON AVENUE OFFERINGS OF THE PAST HALF CENTURY

5 Holiday Inn, *Bob Johnson*
SB XXXI 1997

Itching to tell the public about the face-lift it was giving its hotels, Holiday Inn showed us another unexpected makeover. The setting is a high school class reunion where Tom, a clueless motormouth, walks up to a smoking-hot member of the class of '75. He can't place her. Then it hits him: This stunner is none other than Bob Johnson—*who's now a she!* The reaction shot is one of pure disgust. Guess which hotel chain the transgender community won't be frequenting.

4 Cash4Gold, *MC Hammer and Ed McMahon* **SB XLIII** 2009



Nothing keeps football fans in an upbeat Super Sunday mood quite like watching a pair of washed-up, cash-strapped B-list celebrities bragging about how much dough they raised by selling off their 24-karat valuables. Here, Hammer and McMahon, ahem, humorously boast about hocking their gold cuff links, gold records and gold hip replacements. The cruelest cut: a depressed McMahon's caressing his gilded toilet and saying, "Goodbye, old friend." *Hiyoooo!*

3 Groupon, *Save the Money—Tibet* **SB XLV** 2011

In this unfunny, poorly conceived and insensitive plug for the young digital couponing company, actor Timothy Hutton begins by talking about the plight of the Tibetan people—then abruptly jackknifes into the great deal he got on Himalayan fish curry, thanks to one of the company's discounts. Great, so he's also shortchanging Tibetan refugees trying to scratch out a living in America! Groupon pulled the ad a few days after the game.

2 Dirt Devil, *Fred Astaire*
SB XXXI 1997

Long before a hologram of Tupac was mesmerizing Coachella-goers, Dirt Devil tried to class up its line of broom vacs by pairing the household cleaning appliance with the late Fred Astaire, who had died a decade earlier of pneumonia. He certainly looks graceful, and the product sure looks easy to use. . . . But there's something a bit exploitative and, well, kinda creepy about watching one of Hollywood's most beloved entertainers ghoulishly hawking cleaning aids from beyond.

1 Salesgenie, *Pandas*
SB XLII 2008

With a tone deafness rivaling Mickey Rooney's Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, this spot trots out a grab bag of offensive Asian stereotypes. The animated ad, set at Ling Ling's Bamboo Furniture Shack, focuses on the panda proprietors of a failing business who employ Salesgenie to resurrect their operation. How would "100 free sales leads" help these pandas upgrade to a bamboo superstore? Who cares when there are so many more troubling issues to grapple with here? —C.N.

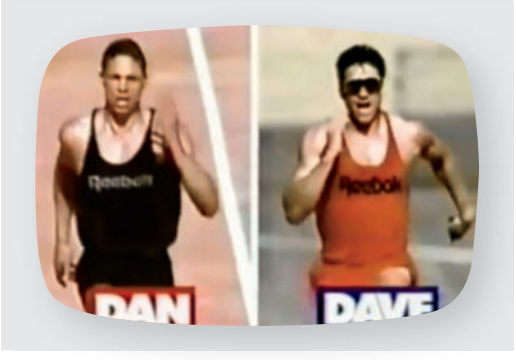
Super Bowl XXV between the Giants and the Bills, for example, played out during the height of the Gulf War, on Jan. 27, 1991. Operation Desert Storm had started just 10 days earlier and was so on the minds of the country that ABC preempted the game's halftime show for Peter Jennings's report on the progress of the conflict. And while the game itself was little affected, the tenor of that Super Bowl's commercials was decidedly more sober and sedate than usual. "A lot of advertisers completely pulled out," Elliott points out. "And some, like Coca-Cola, yanked their humorous ads and ran serious, somber ones instead."

Eleven years later, at Super Bowl XXXVI, the national mood could not have been more raw. Less than five months after the attacks of 9/11, advertisers were unsure how to make the art of selling look seemly. How do you acknowledge a tragedy without appearing like you're exploiting it? It may have been the trickiest and finest line that Madison Avenue has ever had to walk. Says Grant Pace, executive creative director at the Boston-based agency Conover Tuttle Pace, "It was like when *Saturday Night Live* asked if it was O.K. to laugh again."

While most of that year's Super Bowl commercials erred on the side of tasteful caution, one ad seemed to walk that fine line with more confidence and creativity than the rest: Budweiser's *Respect* spot. The 60-second ad, which aired only once, was directed by Zack Snyder (*300*; *Batman v Superman*), who used Anheuser-Busch's oldest and most beloved symbols to convey reassurance that while the world had changed in horrible ways, certain traditions will always endure. In the commercial, Budweiser's Clydesdales travel in formation east across the snowy heartland. They cross the Brooklyn Bridge, stop to look in the direction of the Statue of Liberty, then turn and bend their hooves, bowing toward Ground Zero and the Manhattan skyline. When it's over, there's no tagline, no sales pitch. Just the Budweiser logo. "There was a real purity of motivation that I hope comes across in the commercial," says Snyder. "As an advertiser it felt like the only way we could express ourselves. A dancer would have danced, a singer would have written a song—all we had was this medium, so we tried to express our emotions through the commercial."

Pace, one of the brains behind the original Bud Bowl spots, can still recall the exact moment the *Respect* commercial aired. "I remember sitting there stunned. Every note was just right. I've been doing this for a long time, but they nailed it. It wasn't just one of the best Super Bowl commercials I'd ever seen, it was more than that. It was exactly what we all needed, at the exact moment we needed it, on the biggest stage there is."

"A DANCER WOULD HAVE DANCED, A SINGER WOULD HAVE WRITTEN A SONG," SNYDER SAYS OF 9/11. *"ALL WE HAD WAS THIS MEDIUM."*



REEBOK, *DAN AND DAVE*
What disappointed ad fans missed: After flopping at the 1992 trials, Dan O'Brien came back and won decathlon gold in '96.

SO, AFTER 50 years and thousands of commercials, where does that leave us now? Consider it a sign of the times that on Feb. 7 you won't even have to turn on your TV to answer that question. One can already find this year's ad salvo on YouTube and Facebook. "In the old days, you would never tell anyone what your Super Bowl ad was going to be; people had to watch it during the game," says Elliott. "Now, with social media, you can release them early and build buzz. Old Spice's "I'm on a horse" ad from 2010 and the Volkswagen Darth Vader ad from '11 were the epitome of that. They got millions of views before the game even happened."

In the past week, brands like Bud Light, Honda and Amazon have uploaded teasers of their latest barrage of Super Bowl commercials. And if there's an early theme to be divined, it's that in 2016 humor, celebrities and cute puppies still sell. (At least, that's the hope.) Bud Light's 30-second spot—the one where comedians Seth Rogen and Amy Schumer moisturize and squeeze into Spanx, getting dolled up for a Bud Light party—has already registered more than a million views.

It's no doubt an exciting moment for advertisers trying to cast the widest net possible. But what about for the rest of us? Today, with the state of social media, it's not just that we're able to see the latest Super Bowl commercials before the game—we can't avoid them even if we want to. Look down at your phone, check your Facebook or Twitter feed, and there are Rogen and Schumer, again and again. After the 10th time, you might want to buy a Coors Light just out of spite. But if it keeps going this way, it's easy to imagine a not-too-distant future that looks a lot like Apple's *1984* commercial. □

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