READING PASSAGE 3

*You should spend about 20 minutes on **Questions 27–40**, which are based on Reading Passage 3 below.*

Leo Burnett: Sultan of Sell

He was not the adman's adman. He wasn't a hipster like William Bernbach, who tapped into youth culture with the "Think Small" campaign for Volkswagen. He wasn't an elegant rationalist like David Ogilvy, whose ads famously advised the rich that a Rolls-Royce was the sensible car to buy. He didn't even work on Madison Avenue, but in Chicago's Loop instead. But Leo Burnett, the jowly genius of the heartland subconscious, is the man most responsible for the blizzard of visual imagery that assaults us today.

In a career that spanned nearly six decades, his aptitude for inventing evocative, easily recognizable corporate identities spawned the Jolly Green Giant, the Marlboro Man, the Pillsbury Doughboy and Tony the Tiger, among other familiar icons of commerce. By the late 1950s Burnett had emerged as a prime mover in advertising's creative revolution, which grew in the glow of television's rise as America's consummate commercial medium. By 1960 Burnett's roster of clients had grown exponentially; at the time of his death the agency's billings exceeded $400 million annually. By last year that figure approached $6 billion.

Burnett's creativity was in stark contrast to that of some of his contemporaries, who built advertising companies around research and marketing expertise. Burnett forged his reputation around the idea that "share of market" could only be built on "share of mind," the capacity to stimulate consumers' basic desires and beliefs. To achieve this goal, Burnett moved beyond standard industry practice. Early ad schemes were based primarily on a foundation of carefully worded argument focused on the purported qualities of the product being sold. Images were mere decoration for the argument.

The industry was already changing when Burnett joined the Homer McGee agency in Indianapolis, Ind., in 1919, after a brief stint as a newspaperman. Product claims were giving way to elaborate narratives–imaginary stories of consumers whose purchase had been rewarded with popularity, success, romance.

Burnett moved the image to center stage. Visual eloquence, he was convinced, was far more persuasive, more poignant, than labored narratives, verbose logic or empty promises. Visuals appealed to the "basic emotions and primitive instincts" of consumers. Advertising does its best work, he argued in 1956, by impression, and he spent much of his career encouraging his staff to identify those symbols, those visual archetypes, that would leave consumers with a "brand picture engraved on their consciousness."

Burnett did not originate this conceit. In his classic 1922 study *Public Opinion*, journalist Walter Lippmann maintained that pictures are "the surest way of conveying an idea. A leader or an interest that can make itself master of current symbols is master of the current situation."

Burnett was exactly that. Creativity, he advised, called for an intuitive ability to identify the inherent drama that resided within a product through the conscious use of "earthy vernacular" imagery. To explain his concept of inherent drama, Burnett repeatedly cited a 1945 print campaign for the American Meat Institute. After careful consideration, he related, "we convinced ourselves that the image of meat should be a virile one, best expressed in red meat." At the time it was highly unusual, even distasteful, to portray uncooked meat in advertisements. Enthusiastically breaking the code, Burnett produced full-page ads depicting thick chops of raw red meat against a bright-red background. "Red against red was a trick," he explained, "but it was a natural thing to do. It just intensified the red concept and the virility and everything else we were trying to express. This was inherent drama in its purest form."

Reviewing his agency's work, one is struck by Burnett's penchant for employing a range of masculine archetypes. Some were designed to appeal to female consumers. With the Jolly Green Giant, he resurrected a pagan harvest god to monumentalize "the bounty of the good earth"–and to sell peas. Years later, with the creation of the Doughboy, Burnett employed a cuddly endomorph to symbolize the friendly bounce of Pillsbury home-baking products. Aiming at male audiences in the '50s, a time when filter cigarettes were viewed as effeminate, Burnett introduced a tough and silent tattooed cowboy on horseback, "the most masculine type of man," he explained, to transform the image of Marlboro cigarettes–for better or worse, one of the most enduring advertising icons ever devised.

Like many other persuasion professionals of his generation–most notably Edward Bernays, the patriarch of public relations–Burnett was obsessed with finding visual triggers that could effectively circumvent consumers' critical thought. Though an advertising message might be rejected consciously, he maintained that it was accepted subliminally. Through the "thought force" of symbols, he said, "we absorb it through our pores, without knowing we do so. By osmosis."

With the arrival of television in the late ’40s–an electronic salesroom going into nearly every American home–Burnett believed merchandisers had found the Holy Grail. “Television,” he asserted, “is the strongest drug we’ve ever had to dish out.” It marked the moment when graphic representation arrived as the lingua franca of commerce.

Evaluating Leo Burnett’s contribution nearly 30 years after his death, one is of two minds. There is something both old-fashioned and timeless in the slightly homoerotic repertoire of corporate images he fathered. Born during the springtime of American consumer culture, when sales pitches were infused with an unfettered sense of optimism, a booming-voiced tiger like Tony and a benevolent Green Giant today come across as quaint throwbacks to the time when sugared breakfast cereals could still claim to provide an ideal start to the perfect day, and when mushy canned peas nestled alongside a piece of fat-marbled beef represented a healthy diet. Though Burnett’s corporate talismans endure, they occupy a world where consumers are increasingly caustic about the products that they purchase. The effort by marketers to capitalize on the cynical mind-set of an MTV generation has overwhelmed the quest for universal human archetypes. Jadedness and sarcasm are becoming the dominant argot of advertising.

On the other hand, the central principles that guided Burnett’s practice remain prescient. His celebration of nonlinear advertising strategies, characterized by visual entreaties to the optical unconscious, continues to inform the strategies of adcult. In advertising copy, the conspicuous triumph of typography over text, of catchphrase over explanation, reflects Burnett’s admonition that–to the public mind–visual form is more persuasive than carefully reasoned argument.

Burnett’s thinking has come to define much of our mental environment beyond advertising. He saw advertising as the “fun” side of business, but the historical repercussions of his wisdom can be disquieting. Amid the present-day flood of images–each designed to rally emotions for a social, political or commercial goal–the notion of an informed public, once a cherished cornerstone of democracy, may be passing into oblivion.

References
Ewen, S. (1998, December 7). *Leo Burnett: Sultan of sell*. *TIME*.
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