

News & Features



Culturally Speaking

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Four decades ago Marshall McLuhan understood the power of the media long before those in control did. His work, *The Medium is the Massage*, pointed to the fact that media possessed the ability to work us over completely; leaving no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. That said there is a current commercial director making waves who is equally concerned about the delivery of the 'message.' Meet **Uber Content** director **Sean Mullens**.

Raised on a farm in central Ohio, and finding only minimal artistic inspiration during his morning chores, Mullens set his future sights on the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. After graduation, the young designer jumped headfirst into the world of advertising, ultimately moving to San Francisco where he rose quickly through the creative ranks, ultimately securing the position of creative director on the award-winning Levi's account at FCB/SF. Years later, with a mantle full of awards, Mullens challenged himself once again and transitioned into directing.

While always attracted to the world of advertising, it is by Mullens own admission that he didn't enjoy making ads at the agency. "I suppose that's a bit of an oxymoron," states the director, "but to this day I feel the struggle within on whether I'm adding to the problem, or helping." Good or bad, Mullens is thoroughly invested in significant advertising that goes past the selling – advertising that pushes the envelope to transcend the norm. "What I do is basically Pop Art," muses Mullens. "If there was a future archeological dig stumbling upon commercials from this era, they would be reflective of the culture and time." It is exactly this perspective that makes this director so intriguing. Clever, smart, and astute, it is his ability to not only question motives of society, but his own as well.

Truly believing that advertising is an art form for the time, Mullens also feels that the advances in technology offer up a plethora of opportunities. "I don't think creatives recognize the power they have," states Mullens. "Since advertising culturally speaks to the now, we have some responsibility in understanding how our role in it works. There are so many possibilities, so many creative solutions, that the opportunity for agencies to transcend the ordinary is exhilarating." Believing that creatives can more effectively reframe corporations' take on the advertising landscape than anyone else, Mullens sees that the bar on responsibility is raised even higher when using a multitude of vernaculars. "The solution to advertising is no different then when Goodby said 'if you make good ads, people will watch them,' says the director. "I'd like to go a step further and add 'responsible' to that phrase as well."

Therefore, it should come to no surprise that Mullens views the current advertising topography as encouraging. "I think we're entering a Renaissance period," says the director. "For the past 12 years of my directing career, I've seen a steady descent into fear-driven advertising. But what I'm witnessing now, with the internet and eventual media convergence, is a creative revolution. Fantasy or not, I believe we are moving towards a point of change."

Moving may be an understatement for the pace that is defining the advertising of today. Mullens current commercial reel abounds with innovation, showcasing such clients as **Verizon** (McCann-Erickson/NY), McDonald's (DDB/Chicago), **Samsung** (Leo Burnett/Chicago), **Budget** (Cliff Freeman & Partners/NY), Molsen Blue, and **Nintendo** (Leo Burnett/Chicago), as well as a short film for **Atari** (client direct). In addition to new spot work, Mullens has released the documentary *Filthy Gorgeous*, *The Trannyshack Story*, which has received Audience Awards in London, San Francisco, Seattle, New York, Toronto, Sydney, Florence and Paris. The film - which explores a subculture of the drag queen world - was also an Official Selection of the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival and can now be seen on YouTube and YouAreTV.

Although there are a multitude of differences between the commercial and film formats, each sector provides the director with the expressive freedom that he craves. "There are strengths in both the long and short formats," says Mullens. "The short is very precise, much like telling a good joke. The longer motif is obvious – not only does it allow you to breathe, it allows you to give further insight to those of your characters. The beauty for me here, are the moments. One must allow the moments to be – awkward or not – because it is in those places where you can explore universal truths."

Both the commercial world and film world beckon to the director. Currently compiling the needed elements for his documentary focusing on the harrowing events in Dafur, Mullens must finally make the trek to the region to capture what he can on film. The documentary, *The Smallest Witness*, consist of a series of drawings done by the children who are first-hand historians of what is happening in their villages. These drawings are essentially the visual collaborative evidence of what they are witnessing.

But it doesn't end there. During the course of his commercial and documentary work Mullens is also busy working on a film-length script. "I'm definitely ready to do a feature," states the director. "In fact I've been ready for the past three or four years – and I finally think this is the year..."

