

GUINNESS: 'SURFER'

Agency: AMV BBDO

Dir: Jonathan Glazer, Art Dir/Creators: Tom Carty, Walter Campbell, Creative Dir: P. Souter, Producer: Y. Chalkley, Sound Designer: J. Burns Production: Academy Film Productions, Publication: 2000, Length: 100secs.

Visual Effects: The Computer Film Company;

Dir: D. Parker, Effects: A. De Wet, 3D Animation: R. Clarke, Design & Grading: T. Debenham,

Digital Paint Artists: G. Tooney, A. Payman, J. Pavlo.

Created in 1850, Arthur Guinness' company has been one of the largest advertising investors from when its first paper ads appeared in the UK in 1929, to winning Clio 'Advertiser of the Year' 2001.ⁱ Guinness spent £15m in the UK alone last year and in the 12 months to the end of June 2000, the brand spent £233m on advertising and promotion worldwide.ⁱⁱ

Originally, the claim was that 'Guinness is good for you' and an emphasis was placed on its supposed strength-giving qualities.



However, a tightening of advertising standards led to an abandonment of this and it was replaced by ironic, yet confusing slogans such as 'Guinness isn't good for you'. Unsurprisingly, these early ads have not stood the test of time.

In the 1980s and early 90s, the drink's characteristic black colour, with a creamy white head, became the selling point and seemingly anything sharing this profile, including a snow-topped black bucket, could represent a pint of Guinness. In 1987 this was extended to the blonde actor Rutger Hauer, dressed entirely in black, claiming that Guinness was 'Pure Genius'. Hauer had played an emotional android in *Blade Runner* and the idea was to associate Guinness with intelligence, mystery and above all chic;

'Guinness is cool', an '...acquired taste'.ⁱⁱⁱ

This reached a comic conclusion in the 'Anticipation' ad, by Euro RSCG Ireland, which drew self-referential attention to the relatively long time it takes to pour a pint of Guinness and wait for it to settle. It turned this characteristic into something positive. It was director Tony Kaye who turned Guinness TV ads 'into an artform'^{iv} in 1996 with the 'Not everything in black and white makes sense' campaign. These adverts included a fish riding a bicycle and the cleverly ironic suggestion that 80% of statistics are made-up. Thus Guinness achieved a reputation for wit and a tongue-in-cheek philosophy, the major motivation behind the creativity when AMV obtained the brief in the late 90s.

AMV BBDO was formed from the amalgamation of Batten Barton Durstine & Osborn (one of the original, large Madison Avenue agencies of New York, along with JWT, Y&R and McCann-Erickson) with Abbott Mead Vickers. According to the executive creative director, Souter, it is the largest agency there has ever been in Britain, with '...more creative awards than any of [their] competitors', assisting their claim to be 'the best advertising agency in Britain'^v

AMV's first Guinness ad, 'Bet on black', was the vision of director Frank Budgen (of *Gorgeous Enterprises*), Dave Throssall (of *The Mill*) and copywriter Tom Carty. Conceived as a Guinness-powered snail race, it played on the idea that snail races take a long time by showing snails travelling at super-high speeds along a lengthy tarmac track. This would happen at the end of a short dramatic pause of non-activity that followed the starter's gun and thus took the idea that having a pint of Guinness 'involves waiting' even further. The tagline '*Good things come to those who wait*' was an amalgamation of the old '*Guinness is good for you*' posters and the ancient adage '*The best things come to those who wait*'.^{vi} The film used a mixture of real snails and photorealistic computer generations laid over live action from a village in Cuba, 1½ hours outside Havana, capturing the cramped, humid gambling atmosphere of a Caribbean cockfight. A mass of film had to be sorted through and reduced to a tight 60 seconds of advert that immediately achieved great popular acclaim. However, it would be the another AMV ad for Guinness, which used some of the lessons from '*Bet on black*', but also created a carefully crafted montage of sound and image, that came to be dubbed *the greatest advert of all time*.



'*Surfer*' starts with a full-face shot of a man looking past the camera into the distance. One senses that he is both nervous and in awe simultaneously as the wind blows the longish hair on his face. Then we see him and three friends grab their surfboards, run down the sandy beach, dive into the surf and start paddling out, from what appears to be a high-cliffed cove. Meeting some huge waves, they dive through them for a beautiful under-water shot. At the same time we hear the voice-over;

'He waits... That's what he does... And I'll tell you what; tick followed tock followed tick followed tock followed tick'



As we see the images of the sea, we glimpse a horse's hoof here and there, then four small surfers heading towards a fifty foot wave and a thumping, pounding drumbeat starts to grow on the soundtrack. The surfers, gasping and exhilarated, turn and jump on their boards just as the monumental wave hits them and drives them on. We see snapshots of wild stallions' eyes and flexing

muscles, before the aerial shot reveals the giant white horses jumping at the head of the wave, seemingly part of the wave itself. The voice-over continues;

'Ahab says "I don't care who you are, here's to your dream". The old sailors return to the bar.'

<cackles and laughter>

' "Here's to you, Ahab" and the phat drummer hit the beat with all his heart'

<sip, gasp, noise of glass on table>

Meanwhile the surfers are mingling with the horses. One falls and disappears, his board flying off behind the wave. Then another falls and the third manages to enter the tube before being engulfed. Now only our friend from the opening shot is left surfing and enters the wave. There's a great shot through the tube of his perfect negotiation of it and then it's over. He is left riding high on top of the water after the wave break, arms held high in triumph. The film pauses on that frame for a second and the pounding soundtrack suddenly stops. Then there is a celebration, with the victors running from the surf with board held high, then his friends wrestling him to the ground, pausing for a second on his face. Then they run back to the water cheering and shouting and the film pauses again on the image of our hero's face in profile, with an expression of total ecstatic joy, all played silently, except for the final commentary;

'Here's to waiting...'

The ad ends with a shot of a pint of Guinness settling in close-up, which suddenly enlarges for a moment, then returns to initial size, accompanied by the pumping drums and the tagline *'Good thing come to those who...'*

Initial inspiration for this ad apparently came from the local pub, where Jonathan Glazer and Tom Carty worked out that it takes 120 seconds to pour a pint of Guinness and wait for it to settle (although barmen usually have their own methods for the 'perfect pint'). Both men had worked on the previous Guinness *'Swimmer'* ad, about an Italian supposedly famed for swimming his local bay, making it to the bar before the barman had finished pouring the pint. This bore definite similarities to Luc Bessons film *The Big Blue* and used some exquisite photography capturing, docu-drama style, the essence of the location.

Staying with this water theme, Glazer and Carty wanted to make a surfer ad, drawing parallels between the wait for a Guinness and the idea of a surfer waiting for the perfect wave. This also has cinematic connections, in the form of Kathryn Bigelow's Hollywood blockbuster *Point Break*, and Carl Prechezer's later and less successful *Blue Juice*. Both men were keen to avoid any connotations of the *Old Spice* ads and the *Beach Boys*. Interestingly Guinness had been advertised by surfing in their Irish TV ads of the 70s and 80s.^{vii} Further ideas came from Herman Melville's famous novel *Moby Dick* and paintings by Eugene Delacroix and Walter Crane showing horses blending with waves.

Written in 1851, *Moby Dick* is the story of Captain Ahab's hunt for the great white whale of that name, while the idea of the horses comes, in fact, from the description of the Roman water god Neptune, whose sea-born transport was drawn by white horses. When white crests were seen on the waves, they became known after them accordingly. Glazer and Carty combined the two ideas and set off to film in Hawaii two months later, in January 1999.

According to Carty, they were after ‘A real Polynesian surfer, waiting for the most amazing surf of his life’.^{viii} Glazer explains that they didn’t want the perfect face, but instead ‘...someone who looked like they would genuinely wait for this extraordinary wave and only *they* would know when it was going to come’. They scoured the local islands and 300 surfers before eventually finding their ‘star’ under a palm tree, a local beach-bum who surfed for female tourists. They picked three other more accomplished local surfers and began filming on a Hawaiian beach where local kings were supposed to be buried, which gave the hero’s victory an unseen spiritual element. A large team of experts on the end of the telephone kept the crew informed of where big waves and sets of waves were going to come, as the shoot was unusually unplannable due to its content.

The eight days of filming were to prove dangerous, ‘...like filming an avalanche’ recalls Glazer. He gave the instructions to the ‘actors’ from a speedboat. The cameraman was hanging precariously off the end of the boat, trying to get those amazing shots and the vessel would accelerate away, keeping just in front of the fifty foot wall of water which was travelling around sixty to seventy miles per hour. Sometimes all the crew were washed off the craft and had to wait several minutes before getting picked up from the surge. The main surfer himself was far from an expert, and Glazer admits that he looked terrified by the ordeal. This, however, showed through in the final production and gave credence to the storyline, making his victory feel all the greater.

Once all the footage had been shot, it had to be digitally combined with the film of the white horses shot in a studio in England, using state-of-the-art computer technology. Glazer used Lippizaner horses and had them painted with muscle tone so that the muscle definition would show up on film. He needed to make sure that the shots would match up and this led to three days repeated shooting of the horses jumping over fences a task even more difficult than filming the surfers.

‘There was a time’, says Glazer, ‘right up to the last week or so, that we weren’t going to have the horses’, feeling that the advert was enough without them.^{ix} They turned to the digital artists at The Computer Film Company to composite the images and blend them harmoniously, before rendering them into the traditional black and white, with a slight olive tint. After the final cut, both Glazer and Carty were pleased that they used the horses and that they came out so well.

The original idea for the soundtrack was to use excerpts from a 1963 radio broadcast of Dylan Thomas’ ‘play for voices’ *Under Milk Wood*, read by Richard Burton and set to an instrumental soundtrack by techno-punk-electonica outfit, Leftfield. The play was about a group of villagers preparing for spring in a Welsh seaport. The client did not feel this would work, so a new prose was created out of a mixture of *Moby Dick*, what seems to be some influences from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s epic *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and some modern elements. The last line was inspired by James Joyce, author of *Ulysses*, the story of an Irish revolutionary, and *Portrait of the Artist*, in which he explains that Man must rid himself of all social trappings before he can become a true artist. This transcript was read by a drinking partner of Glazer’s called Louie, and dripped with meaning and reference to waiting for something momentous, a great moment, the fulfilment of a dream, while the drumming of Leftfield’s ‘*Phat Planet*’ feels like a heart pounding or wave crashing.

The sense of achievement becomes something quite tangible when the final shot of the our Polynesian hero, who really *has* just completed the greatest and most terrifying surf of his life, concentrates on his eyes, like the steeds’ wild eyes, which seem to be pointing in different directions. ‘It becomes what’s in his mind’s eye’, says Carty, ‘The horses become symbolic because they become the experience of riding a sixty foot wave.’

So did it work?

Of this there can be no question, really. The short minute of ad was one of the most encapsulating and enthralling ever produced, impossible not to watch to find the outcome of the storyline, a tightly knit tapestry of myth, fact, and academically drawn connections between them. It was composed of quick-paced cuts and mixed footage, teasing the eye and brain, although this was

not something most would have been consciously aware of. It went beyond the norms, the requirements of ads. It wasn't pure jingoism, sensationalist or tentatively cool, here today and gone tomorrow. Instead it was crafted, thought-out, akin to much earlier modes of advertising from the smaller years of the 20th century and the era of arts and craftsmanship. It wasn't patronising or over insistent. This is why it affected people. On one level, people can relate to 'waiting for the next big thing' in many aspects of the everyday, but on another level, it distilled a fantasy of danger and achievement that everyone has dreamt of at some point in their lives. People wanted to see the ad on TV, it wasn't about the Guinness. On the Channel 4 airing of *100 Greatest TV Ads*, TV Presenter and former *Smash Hits* Editor Kate Thornton typified the viewer appreciation;

'I don't know a single person...who [wasn't] impressed by that ad.' At the same time she shows it did draw the connection successfully to Guinness, repositioning it in her mind from mere larger to a fashion accessory.

'Now, suddenly...it's become incredibly chic...a rather sophisticated product by association and that's a really clever thing to do.'^x

Thus, in the eyes of the accountants, it achieved its aim in economic terms. Estimates at its cost place it over £100 million, yet it '...helped Guinness achieve their biggest sales and market share, at a time when fewer people are drinking beer.'^{xi}

It took Guinness out of the realm of the comic into the realm of the deep and meaningful. Apart from being voted the greatest ad of all time in the UK by *Sunday Times* readers and *Channel 4* viewers, it achieved two Gold and one Silver awards from Clio 2000, as well as two British Design and Art Direction 2000 Gold awards, the only double Gold for forty years, and a Gold Lion at Cannes Lions International Film Festival 1999.^{xii}

It is perhaps this last award that is the most telling. The only criticism that might be levelled against it could be that in some ways it was *too* much for an advert, leaving no room for what followed. The next ad by AMV for Guinness was the '*Dreamer*' campaign, continuing the idea of dream fulfilment, and featuring the members of a fictional elite club of adventurers who aim to find the meaning of life through their dreams. The bizarre scenes featured a stout-drinking squirrel and a giant curtain that revealed the meaning of life, all shot in the trademark black and white. It was filmed in sub-zero temperatures in Budapest, using fifty stuntmen, around five hundred extras and a cast of local actors and formed part of a £5million campaign.^{xiii} Despite the fact that the ad was another brilliant piece of crafting, it didn't, and probably could never, top the surfer commercial, seeming darker and moodier. Glazer says that despite the ad working (and it did achieve a Bronze Lion at Cannes 2001) he had wanted something out of it but didn't feel he achieved it. He found directing a personal experience, not something he could just distance himself from in sacrifice to the client's needs, and felt that adverts don't require the kinds of depths he wants to take his work to. 'I'm kind of in the wrong business.'^{xiv}



Glazer wanted truth, emotion, not just a sales pitch, and that is the preserve of films, not adverts, production of which he never really aspired to. He was pleased that '*Surfer*' was voted best ad in the *Channel 4* poll, but notes the timing of this. The programme was aired only months after the ads release, when it was still fresh in people's minds. However, the fact that articles

are still be written on it two years later, as Hamilton points out in *MediaGuardian.com*, shows that it will pass the test of time for those who remember it.

'*Surfer* was immediately accessible', Glazer explains, 'it was one for the boys. It's a dream scenario for someone who's paying a million quid to have their pint advertised, and the pressures are to repeat that.'^{xv}

He suggests that '*Dreamer*' was far removed from '*Surfer*' so as to avoid creating a rod for his own back by becoming formulaic. Glazer realises that his cutting-room background, creating TV trailers for commercials, allows him to be succinct.

'You're telling a story in cuts'; a great skill required for advertising, but he also notes the contributions of his fellow workers, especially Walter Campbell. Campbell smoothed decisions over with the client to the extent that Glazer had another large quantity of Guinness money to spend and pretty much free rein with creative decisions.

Glazer worked on the music videos for *Radiohead's* '*Street Spirit*' and '*Karma Police*', as well as directing his first feature film in 2000, the Brit gangster-flick '*Sexy Beast*'. He now wants to continue down this road with various projects, including a collaboration with French screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière, and predicts that '*Dreamer*' is his last Guinness commercial.

Meanwhile, during only the weeks that I was researching this advert, Walter Campbell, now widely regarded as one of the most sort-after creatives in the UK along with Tom Carty, left AMV with other creatives, Sean Doyle and Dave Dye, to set up their own company, CDD.^{xvi} Initially backed by Italian agency Armando Testa, whose UK office was set up 2 years ago with the former Y&R boss David Gray, the deal fell through, only to be rescued by AMV's US owner, the giant Omnicom.^{xvii} Casper Thykier, AMV's business director and account manager on the Guinness projects has joined them, along with the former new business director of Lowe Lintas, Alison Hoad, as managing director. This looks set to be one of the most exciting new UK companies and Mercedes-Benz have already signed-up as their first client. This is a perfect illustration of how quickly the pace and people in advertising move, how interconnected the agencies are and the entrepreneurial nature at the heart the business. The agency league changes constantly.

Surfer will probably never be bettered on it's own terms, and has inadvertently led to some new avenues for those involved in it.

While being in a series, it stands as a pretty unique piece of advertising brilliance.

ⁱ <http://www.brandera.com>

ⁱⁱ Garrett, 2000, <http://www.mediaguardian.com>

ⁱⁱⁱ Fordham, 2000, <http://www.eyeonuniverse.com>

^{iv} Robinson, 2000, pp136.

^v <http://www.amvbbdo.com>

^{vi} Robinson, 2000, pp135.

^{vii} <http://www.fortunecity.co.uk>

^{viii} Robinson, 2000, pp137.

^{ix} *ibid.*, pp140

^x *ibid.*, pp141

^{xi} Souter, <http://www.amvbbdo.com>

^{xii} <http://ww0.adforum.com>

^{xiii} Cozens, 4/2001, <http://www.mediaguardian.com>

^{xiv} Hamilton, 2001, <http://www.mediaguardian.com>.

^{xv} *ibid.*

^{xvi} Cozens, 7/2001, <http://www.mediaguardian.com>.

^{xvii} Cozens, 11/2001, <http://www.mediaguardian.com>.