

STAY FREE!

magazine
purchase
our blog
a b o u t
email list
curriculum



Search

How to Look at Billboards

[by Howard Gossage]

*Howard Gossage was an ad man in the 1950s and 1960s who pioneered what we would now call "**anti-ads**" (ads that critique or mock advertising). For this, he should be forgiven. Gossage was a rather singular human being and his unwavering commitment to the common good is discernable even in the most unlikely of places: the ads he created. He was also a brilliant writer and a vocal critic of advertising's deleterious impact on the public—including public space. This article, from Harper's, February 1960, is one of my favorites. It and much of Gossage's work have been compiled in *The Book of Gossage (Copy Workshop)*. – Carrie McLaren*

While it is easy to see billboards, it is hard to look at them objectively without getting bogged down in trivial or secondary criticisms; nevertheless let me try.

It is so strange that billboards exist at all that the current controversy about whether outdoor advertising should be allowed along federal highways achieves the unreality of a debate on whether witch burning should be permitted in critical fire areas. Apparently no one has thought to wonder just what in the hell billboards are doing anywhere.

Why do you suppose this is? It must be that billboards have somehow acquired an easement across our minds just as they have gained squatter's rights on our visual air space. They've been there—everywhere—for a long time and we have grown used to them. It requires a conscious effort to recognize that a billboard has the same objective status as a "Jesus Saves" scrawled on a culvert of men's room poetry; it is there by public sufferance. But there is this difference: while those other gratuitous messages are accorded the shrugging tolerance that we grant to eccentrics, outdoor advertising has come to be regarded as an institution like any other overtly respectable industry. This is where the confusion starts, for if one accepts this premise all sorts of preposterous assumptions seem worthy of consideration; indeed, it would be positively un-American to question them.

Outdoor advertising is most certainly an institution; but so was the open range. And just as the open range ceased to exist when private interest was no longer compatible with public rights, so it is with outdoor advertising. While it is unlikely that we shall have more than a smattering of midnight poster-burnings, it is inevitable that the billboard will eventually join such other relics of America's past as battleships, running boards, the language of flowers, flypaper, and two-a-day vaudeville. Perhaps our grandchildren will collect vintage Coca-Cola and Edsel billboards the way we do Toulouse-Lautrec and bullfight posters. They will do nicely to fill in unwanted picture windows; I am assuming that tomorrow's man will grow less interested in bringing the outdoors indoors as he again becomes emboldened to meet it halfway.

As a matter of observable fact, the billboard is already starting to vanish from the American scene because of zoning laws and new residential developments of one sort and another. This, of course, does not mean that you have to hurry to get in your field work; there are still plenty of collector's items around. But the market is starting to dry up thanks to, of all things, the automobile. The automobile: the very thing that made possible outdoor advertising's greatest prosperity also contained the germ of its certain doom. The billboard, you might say, is dying of success. If only the horse had never been replaced, outdoor advertising, in modest flower, might have been tolerated indefinitely.

This is how it all came to pass: once upon a time, there was a blacksmith (say) in a small town. He didn't need a sign since everybody knew he was a blacksmith, and even if they hadn't known, they would have found out very soon, what with all the clanging. Still, he did have a sign of sorts: a horseshoe. Anything more would have been pure show, since nobody could read. Time passes; people learned to read, and so did the blacksmith.

One day an itinerant sign painter came by and made him a real sign, with letters; it said: "Blacksmith."

I haven't mentioned that he was the only blacksmith in town, or was until (the place was starting to boom a little) another smith set up shop. At this point, you may be sure, the sign painter sold a new sign to the first blacksmith, let us call him Brown: "Brown the Blacksmith/Quality Horseshoes since 1776," and to the new blacksmith (Green) one which read: "Green the Blacksmith/Modern Horseshoeing."

And so competition was born. That might have been the end of it, had it not been for our friend the sign painter, by now no longer itinerant. He went to Brown and tried to sell him a new sign. Brown said, with justice, that he already had a new sign. Oh, the sign painter said, he meant *another* sign. With all the

new people moving in (not to mention drummers and other transit business) it might be well to catch the trade before it actually got in to town. Just look at the Rotary and Kiwanis meeting notices. Brown fell for it and so, of course, did Green.

This was an important milestone in outdoor-advertising history, for it marked the first time a sign was not physically attached to a place of business. From there on it was just a matter of extension. The sign painter began to specialize, and as he did so the signs became larger and further afield. He expanded, but at first he was largely limited to the sides of country barns and city buildings. It was not until the advent of the automobile that he got a glimpse of the staggering potential.

His was a stirring experience, roughly comparable to commanding the only keyhole on Ladies' Night at the Turkish Bath. He saw Main Street become an arterial road along with the newly mobile population hopscotched to the suburbs, leaving vacant lots in its wake—enough traffic to warrant billboards, enough land to build them on! Moreover, his Main Street reached out, far enough to meet the next city's Broadway—a highway. To the sign painter it was one long vacant lot. End of story.

That is the end of my allegory but not quite the end. At this point people began to be aware of outdoor advertising not as a raffish collection of isolated phenomena but as an ordered, reachable institution. It is very easy to slide your mind over "Good Eats 1/2 mi." or "Repent!" even if you do not find them attractive. Besides, they are only one of a kind, you may not pass that way again and, above all, you have no recourse. I imagine it would be difficult to find the man who had scribbled an obscenity on a fence and, finding him, to get him to admit it.

There was no such difficulty about billboards. The outdoor advertising's company name was neatly, proudly lettered on a plaque, there for all to see, and the sign itself was devoted to the sales message of a large and reputable firm. Recourse galore, offered and taken up. But it was not taken up by as many as one might expect, for, as we noted earlier on, we have got used to billboards; they have become a part of our way of life. On the other hand, how many garden clubs, neighborhood improvement leagues, and Pro Bono Publicos are needed to constitute a vanguard? Not many.

It is generally realized how sensitive large businesses are to even minor criticism. I have seen one of the world's most colossal corporations stopped dead in its advertising tracks by a single derogatory letter addressed to the president and forwarded by him without comment to the advertising manager who, horrified, immediately called the advertising agency and canceled the campaign in question. The aftermath of this incident is equally revealing: the agency then got *two* people to

write the president letters that extravagantly praised the ads, and they saved the day. Four cents' worth of postage sufficed to swerve the course of a billion-dollar enterprise; eight cents put it back on track.

The outdoor advertising industry has done its best both to defend itself and to placate its critics. It has maintained costly legal, public relations, and legislative advisory staffs. It has devoted many of its nicest locations to public piety, and it must be admitted that "The family that prays together stays together" shows progress over "The day of judgement is at hand!" The industry has even landscaped its billboards and put little picket fences around them. All, alas, to no avail. You just can't please some people.

The billboard's day of judgement is surely at hand, yet awareness of this fate seems to elude the still-embattled principals, i.e. the public and the outdoor industry, as it is called in the trade. ("The outdoor industry," what a splendid name! It conjures up visions of Thornton W. Burgess and a host of dwarfs helping Old Mother Nature, Jack Frost, Johnny Woodchuck, and Reddy Fox to organize the countryside.)

Almost the only argument against outdoor advertising one ever seems to hear is that it blocks out the scenery and is unsightly. This isn't a bad point, but it isn't as good as you might suppose. The industry is quick to answer that less than 10 percent of all outdoor advertising is in open countryside, outside of developed areas. I am not sure what this means, for it is possible to drive fifty miles from New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles and never be out of a developed area of some type. As to unsightliness, the industry can prove that its billboards are well-constructed and well-maintained. We'll accept that, although it does seem a trifle immaterial. It is rather like a man who is accused of shouting in a hospital quiet zone insisting that he has shiny teeth and gargles after every meal.

The industry naturally also sticks up for the design values of the posters themselves. It is right; the designs are the best money can buy. Truly, from an aesthetic point of view, it is hard to see that most billboards are inferior to the property they obscure; usually they are markedly superior.

Do you see why it is a mistake to attack outdoor advertising on aesthetic grounds? The row then becomes a matter of comparative beauty and one can go on haggling about that forever. In a sense the garden clubs have led us down the garden path. For when the girls insist that they shall never see a billboard as lovely as a tree it then becomes legitimate to consider all the things a billboard *is* lovely as. There are quite a few: ramshackle barns, flophouses, poolrooms, cheap lodgings for ancient ladies with orange-tinted hair. Since the world is absolutely stiff with arguably uglier objects it may be some time

before the billboards come down; presumably the last billboard will stand on top of the last shack.

The other thing wrong with the aesthetic line of attack is its utter irrelevancy. It is like arguing that mice should be kept out of the kitchen because they don't match the Formica. What a billboard looks like has nothing to do with whether it ought to be there. Nor does the fact that it carries advertising have anything to do with it, either. It would be the same thing if it were devoted exclusively to reproductions of the old masters; just as the open range would have been the same thing if they had only run peacocks on it. The real question is: has outdoor advertising the right to exist at all?

The industry says it has. It claims two rights, in fact. In asserting the first of these it clasps the flag firmly to its bosom and, in cadences worthy of William Jennings Bryan, invokes the spirit of free enterprise. Now, it should be understood that the outdoor industry is fighting only against what it regards as discriminatory regulation. It seems never to have occurred to the industry to question its basic right to any existence whatsoever. Therefore, when it protests against operational restrictions, it is not effrontery, as one might think, but outraged indignation. Its reaction is that of an old-time cattle baron the first time a farmer dared to fence in his potato patch.

Outdoor advertising is, of course, a business and as such would ordinarily have a strong case against inroads on its domain. However, there is a very real question whether it has title to its domain. Outdoor advertising is peddling a commodity it does not own and without the owner's permission: your field of vision. Possibly you have never thought to consider your rights in the matter. Nations put the utmost importance on unintentional violations of their air space. The individual's air space is intentionally violated by billboards every day of the year.

But doesn't everything visible violate one's air space? Not at all. Visibility is not the only consideration. The Taj Mahal, street signs, the Golden Gate Bridge, a maze of telephone wires, even a garbage dump—however they may intrude on the eye—are not where they are merely to waylay your gaze; they have other functions as well. A billboard has no other function, it is there for the sole and express purpose of trespassing on your field of vision. Nor is it possible for you to escape; the billboard inflicts itself unbidden upon all but the blind or recluse. Is this not an invasion of privacy? I think it is, and I don't see that the fact that a billboard is out-of-doors make the slightest difference. Even if it were possible for you to not look at billboards if you didn't so choose, why in the world should you have to make the negative effort? Moreover, this invasion of your privacy is compounded in its resale to a third party. It is as though a Peeping Tom, on finding a nice window, were to sell peeps at two bits a head.

Thus we see that what the industry has to sell doesn't really belong to it. It belongs to you. So much for the free enterprise argument.

This brings us to outdoor's second line of defense. I doubt if you would be aware of this line unless you were in the advertising business. It is this: what threatens outdoor advertising threatens all advertising; what discriminates against one advertising medium discriminates against all advertising media. These propositions are interesting to me as an advertising man and I would like to dissect them.

First, what is the difference between seeing an ad on a billboard and seeing an ad in a magazine? The answer, in a word, is permission—or, in three words, freedom of choice. Through a sequence of voluntary acts you have given the magazine advertisement permission to be seen by you. You bought the magazine of your own volition; you opened it at your own pleasure; you flipped or did not flip through it; you skipped or did not skip the ads; finally, it is possible to close the magazine entirely. You exercise freedom of choice all down the line.

The same is true of advertisements in newspapers. It is also true of radio and television commercials though in a different way, I'll admit. Arthur C. Clarke, in *Holiday*, likened TV viewers to "readers who have become reconciled to the fact that the fifth page of every book consists of an advertisement *which they are not allowed to skip*." The fact is that Mr. Clarke and you are allowed to skip—to another channel, to Dr. Frank Baxter, or to bed; you can turn it off entirely. Or you can throw the set out the window. You cannot throw U.S. 40 out the window, especially if you are on it. Nor can you flip a billboard over. Or off. Your exposure to television commercials is conditional on their being accompanied by entertainment that is not otherwise available. No such parity or tit-for-tat or fair exchange exists in outdoor advertising.

And this leads us to the other aspect of the intra-advertising controversy: do laws that discriminate against outdoor advertising discriminate against every other medium? The answer is yes—if you regard Outdoor as an advertising medium, which I don't. It is not an advertising medium; it is isolated advertising. An advertising medium that incidentally carries advertising but whose primary function is to provide something else: entertainment, news, matches, telephone listings, anything. I'm afraid the poor old billboard doesn't qualify as a medium at all; its medium, if any, is the scenery around it and that is not its to give away. Nor is a walk down the street brought to you through the courtesy of outdoor advertising.

Having myself arrived at a point where the billboard no longer exists for me simply because I just can't see it, I wonder how many others feel the same way. So here is a ballot. Would you

mind filling it in? And putting it in a stamped, addressed envelope and mailing it? We in advertising always feel we must make such instructions explicit so as to permit no misunderstands. Otherwise you might stuff it in a hollow tree or twirl it around on a prayer wheel . . .

BILLBOARD BALLOT	
Howard Gossage 451 Pacific Street San Francisco, Calif.	
<input type="checkbox"/> There ought to be billboards. <input type="checkbox"/> There ought not to be billboards.	
Remarks:	_____
<small>(Use one another piece of paper)</small>	
Name	_____
Street	_____
City	_____ State _____

Since Howard Gossage is dead, you can send your coupon to us at Stay Free!, P.O. Box 306 Prince St. Station, New York, NY 10012 and we will take care of it.

[E N D]