

# Semiotic Development of ENCAMS Anti-Litter Campaigns

*By Greg Rowland*

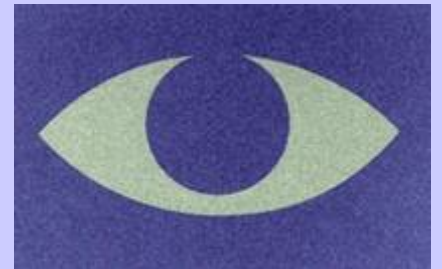
*For*  
ENCAMS

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# Objectives

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Overall: to generate concepts and general guidance for a genuinely salient and effective anti-litter campaign targeted at the 13 – 16 age group.

Within this Greg and the team will address the following issues:

- to analyse historical youth anti-litter campaigns
- to analyse campaigns against other forms of anti-social behaviours
- to hypothesise as to the cultural conditions that encourage litter
- to semiotically review qualitative research on litter
- to explore popular culture's representations of anti-social behaviours
- to identify key codes and cues that influence behaviour amongst 13 to 16 year-olds
- to advise on appropriate tones of voice for addressing 13 to 16 year-olds
- to offer guidance on visual and other cues for an anti-litter campaign
- to bring the above analysis together to provide guidance for a number of potential routes that could best express the anti-litter message to young people



# What is Litter?

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- "Dirt is just matter out of place"?
- a safe, minor form of rebellion and transgression
- personal choices, collective consequences (public/private sphere)
- a literal sign of post-consumption
- a phatic gesture (whereas putting litter in the bin is an emphatic act)
- about the environment rather than The Environment?



# Connotations of the 'Litter' Signifier

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- immediately conjures up preachy adult messages (it's a non-teen word)
- synonymous with grouchy old ladies 'pick that up young man', a different generation, a different wavelength, 'we wouldn't dream of dropping litter in my day'
- punishment - litter picking
- dubious morals 'what does that say about you as a person?' (which could actually be an attractive quality to teens)
- litter louts: lout is another non-teen word, something to be slightly proud of (link with lager louts as having a great time on holiday/in the future/when you're old/what your big brother enjoys doing)
- authority-induced guilt (therefore has little or no emotional resonance)



# Litter or Rubbish?

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- 'Rubbish' is a much more teen-friendly word
- has many more emotional resonances and a wider meaning - rubbish at sport, rubbish haircut, rubbish kisser, rubbish TV programme, Jason Timberlake's rubbish/ West Ham are rubbish
- sounds less petty - a larger crime/transgression
- is rubbish something that's noticed while litter is invisible?
- part of the teen lexicon rather than something sited in authority/teacher/preachy world
- beyond this the signifier 'trash' too has some positives - getting 'trashed', US cultural associations etc



# What are Litter Bins?

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## The Bin

- evil, dirty, horrible, always full, not to be bothered with, too far away
- the site of teen angst over dirt, hygiene
- the antithesis of The Body, i.e. the bin is everything the (teen) body should not be
- a black hole to be feared and revered at the same time (i.e. germs from The Bin could effect you/harm you in some way): the bin therefore is powerful
- emotional connection to rubbish experiences (i.e. 'bin him' as a euphemism for dumping your boyfriend/ 'she was binned'): could be useful



# Cultural Conditions around Litter

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## Disposable Culture

- consumer culture depends on people wanting the new and abandoning the old
- if everybody was satisfied with what they've got then the economy would self-destruct
- increasingly high turnover of fashion, celebrities, fads indicate that disposability is accelerating



# Post-Modernism is like a thin crust pizza

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- No hierarchical dimensions
- Equality of ingredients
- Not ordered
- No start point
- Playful, informal
- Not 'significant'
- Accessible
- Unconcerned with authenticity (chicken tikka pizza)



# Dirty is Fun

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- ▶ dirty carries a lot of cultural positives
- ▶ it represents sexiness, anti-authority, an aesthetic of chaos
- ▶ while clean-cut sexiness still sells, its opposite is also an ever-present cultural trope
- ▶ ultimately, dirty is more interesting than clean - chaos is more exciting and valid than order...



# Neurotic Tidy

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- modern pop psychology fears extreme cleanliness more than mild dirt
- a teenager is expected to have an untidy room - extremes of cleanliness at least as worrying as extremes of dirt
- post-modern requirements for individual self-expression, unfettered by structural conventions, perhaps gives messiness the upper hand in popular culture



# Smallest Rebellion

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- it's actually difficult to be a genuine rebel in the context of post-modernism
- rebellion is co-opted and commodified
- when structures of authority are fluid and individualised then rebellion becomes playful, self-conscious and ironic
- it may therefore be possible to suggest litter dropping as a sad, small rebellion with little real transgressive value



# Litter is Phatic

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- litter dropping is therefore a phatic signal, a small signifier of anti-social behaviour (compared to the empathic signals of sex/drugs/crime)
- it's important to note that this form of transgression is the only one that represents no fun in its execution (crime, sex and drugs do at least offer some pleasure!)
- so asking kids not to drop litter does not actually prevent them having fun - unlike other more major prohibitions/transgressions



# So what do we do?

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- Don't tell the kids anything, but instead entertain and intrigue them and hope that some positive messages will attach themselves coincidentally...!
- Successful youth brands create a parallel world that invites young consumers to play inside...



# Teen World:

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Some general themes that might be of interest:

## **Selfishness and Self-consciousness**

- part of forging your own identity: me, me, me generation
- the most successful teen magazine cover lines always have the world YOU in them

## Relevance to Anti-Litter

- the self is much more important than the consequences of actions



# Teen World (cont)

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## **The Importance of The Moment (forget about tomorrow)**

- what happens today is of totally heightened significance
- extremes of emotion lived in the moment
- expecting instant results (text messages rather than waiting for the phone to ring, ever-changing world, getting what you want quicker than you used to, MTV five second attention span)

## Relevance to Anti-Litter

- over claims or over exaggerations of the consequences of your actions (CF Dr Pepper advertising 'what's the worst that could happen?')



# Teen World (cont)

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## Transitions and Transgressions

- teen world is a weird world full of change
- trends, emotions, physical being, personality - all changing radically and rapidly
- creates uncertainty and fear (of self and of others)

## Relevance to Anti-Litter

- facing your fears could be a fertile area
- weird worlds can be relevant



# Teen World (cont)

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## Embarrassment and Peer Pressure

- pressure to be like everyone else, not to stand out from the crowd
- the (apparent) paradox of fitting in yet trying to rebel at the same time - desire to be 'same but different'
- embarrassment huge area of concern
- parents/teachers/attitudes as embarrassing
- one of the most extreme (and most cutting) emotions of teen-life
- self-consciousness over everything: appearance, lifestyle, choices, behaviour etc
- the ultimate insult ('God she's soooo embarrassing')

## Relevance to Litter

- may be too big a challenge to make binning litter cool (jumping over too many entrenched attitudes about goodie-goodies and geekiness) but tackling the other end (dropping litter) as some kind of pathetic transgression might be promising

# Teen world (cont)

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## Sexual and Social Politics

- sexual attraction, flirting, banter
- the importance of appearance: grooming rituals, products, obsession with getting yourself looking just-right for him/her (rather than yourself)
- again, a site of change, conflict - changing minds, changing rules, new experiences
- daydreams, lust, idols, experimentation

## Relevance to Litter

- could your appearance and the desired appearance of your environment or how you appear to others be linked in some way (again, embarrassing or unattractive to drop litter)?



# Teen World (cont)

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## Us v Them (authority and authoritarian messages)

- teens vs. adults
- authority and authoritarian messages vs. rebellion
- action vs. inaction/apathy
- 'you soooo don't understand', 'how would you know?' 'no, you don't know how I feel', 'you just don't get it do you?'

## Relevance to Litter

- anti-litter messages are firmly entrenched in the 'them' camp - somehow we need to break down this opposition
- pretence of understanding or being on the level/wavelength will be met with cynical responses



# Teen World (cont)

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## Celebration of Slobs

- being sloppy/sloppy and apathetic as part of teen rebellion (messy bedrooms 'it's my room I can keep it how I like')
- slob-heroes: Kevin the teenager, Homer Simpson, Johnny Vegas, characters from US gross out movies e.g American Pie etc
- revenge of the nerd/slob (nerd-gets-girl movies)

## Relevance to Litter

- overt grossness of bins - a dare to bin litter
- do not deny the pleasures of slobbering out in the appropriate contexts



# Keep Britain Tidy Historical Review

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## Bird/Animals

- creates shock and demands attention
- but creates binary rational tensions around decoding
- road-crash ads not entirely clear, requires too much attention?
- rational consequences less powerful than ambient emotional associations with contemporary youth



# Keep Britain Tidy Historical Review (cont)

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## Solid (logo man)

- fun, cheeky codes
- using classic icon in amusing ways
- the KBT Icon is a design classic and has some kitschy retro value (could be used in club fliers or re-worked for t-shirts)
- but ironic preaching needs to play with irony on larger scale to be truly effective

## Rats

- contemporary public health shock/scare codes (like babies anti-smoking ads/contemporary anti-drink driving ads)
- again, not so relevant for young people as it asks them to rationally decode consequences, rather than playing with imaginative possibilities...



# Keep Britain Tidy Historical Review (cont)

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Overall, a need to focus on intangibles - creating an emotional world of imagination rather than a rational one of action and consequence...



# Communicating to Youth: Best Practice Brands

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## Lynx

- open subject
- playful over-claim
- inclusive humour
- a parallel Lynx universe



# Communicating to Youth: Brands (cont)

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## Pot Noodle

- ▶ a parallel universe - rude food world
- ▶ broad irony
- ▶ naughtiness and silliness





# Communicating to Youth: Brands (cont)

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## FCUK

- naughty rude words
- 'clever' subversion
- expression of the "Whatever" positioning



# Communicating to Youth: Brands (cont)

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## Tango

- ▶ intensity
- ▶ stupidity, stunts
- ▶ surrealism
- ▶ weird parallel reality



# The Importance of Metaphor: Creating the Emotional Envelope

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- young people are continually exposed to facts
- but facts and rationality are continually downgraded by contemporary culture (spin, post-modernity, uncertainty)
- the presentation of fact/rational information allows two possible interpretative positions (I agree/I disagree)
- but metaphorical communications allow people to play with meaning, to interact emotionally and imaginatively
- most successful youth brands avoid facts, or use them obliquely as a springboard into metaphor
- a challenge to create an emotional world where an anti-litter message is foregrounded, but is wrapped up in a world of pleasingly negotiable metaphor

# Some Guidelines

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- don't try too hard in any direction
- relaxed approaches signify authority
- sidle up to subjects rather than address them head on
- create metaphor that engages the imagination
- avoid facts that only allow rational binary interpretations
- don't worry about being cool or anxiously contemporary. This never works!
- create a parallel universe of consistent meanings
- embrace perversity and stupidity
- break the rules of the sector
- be naughty, surprising



# Some Guidelines

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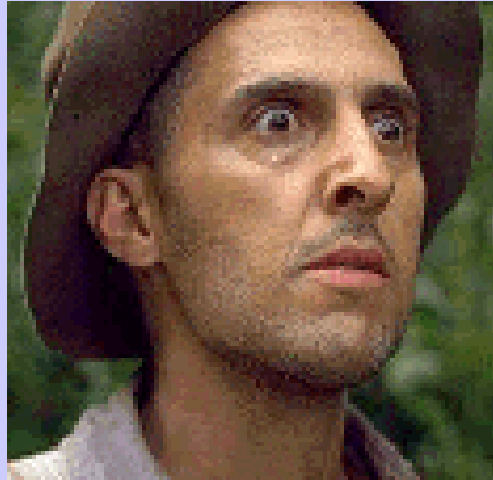
- talk like stupid/funny adults, not like cool kids - amuse yourselves!
- create 'open texts' that allows viewers to play with meanings
- leave subject-positions open and not obviously dictated to by the communication
- be prepared to feel uncomfortable with what you're producing
- speak to people first, age-group/social class second
- forget 'cause and effect' - part of rational authority structures
- offer communications that have the appearance of complexity but are actually fairly simple to decode
- tones should be relaxed, cheeky, intense, open-ended and surprising
- create ideas and words that can be endlessly modified and repeated in the playground - playground currency is the ultimate badge of success!



# Some Ideas for future Campaign Content, Themes, Codes and Tones

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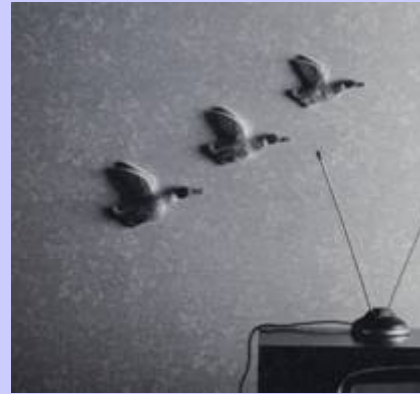
## Dare the Dark Side



- creating the bin as an emblem of fear and challenge
- the bin is the gateway to the dark side of dirt, filth and unpleasantness
- acknowledging that bins are disgusting, and effectively daring kids to confront it

# Celebrating Crapness

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- a celebration of everything that is crap, tacky and useless
- creation of a parallel world of rubbish stuff
- ironic celebration of stuff that needs binning - trash it!



# Rubbish Narratives

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- ▶ connecting consumer pleasure and rubbish as a grand narrative (shop eat buy buy bin bin)
- ▶ possibility for annoying rubbish song on this theme?
- ▶ binning as launching rubbish on a grand adventure - liberating trash



# Bin the Celebrity

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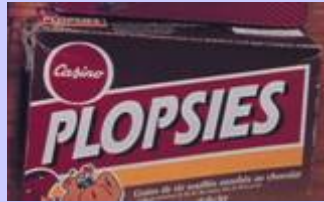


- competition to vote for the celebrity kids most want to bin
- perhaps concluding in a ceremonial binning of the winner (real or effigy)?
- exercising kids' natural cruelty
- binning as an act of cruelty



# Rude Words

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- swearing IS big and clever
- connecting the world of litter with its natural language (shit, crap etc)
- sheer fun of using rude words to gain attention and respect
- extending use of 'tosser'?



# Control

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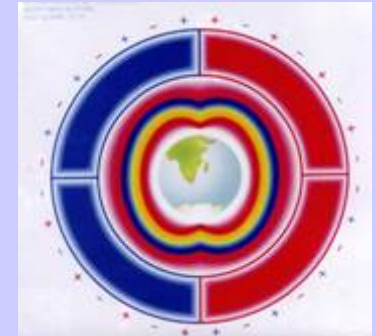


- master of your domain - fascist military order codes
- binning as a ruthless act of disposal
- the act of binning as the heartless act of a James Bond villain



# Bin it to Win

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- ironic contest codes
- a bigger prize than the lottery - the whole planet
- the booby prize is a world full of shit...



# Rubbish is not Fun

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- contrasting fun youth rebellion (as far as possible) with the boring low-grade transgression of litter dropping
- dropping litter provides no buzz or excitement - so why bother?



# A Life Less Rubbish

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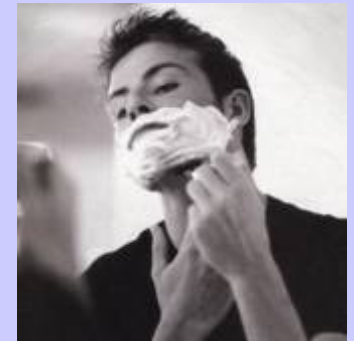
- connecting to the wider meanings of 'rubbish'
- life may be a bit rubbish, but at least you can still bin some of it
- imaginary world where you can bin the boring bits of life....



# Sexy Clean

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- ▶ "That's Tidy" - colloquium for "good" or "sexy"
- ▶ outrageous, excessive sexiness around binning
- ▶ heavy use of eye-candy to promote anti-litter
- ▶ if Lynx or Impulse forged an anti-litter campaign it might look like this....



# Sad Rebel

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- associating littering with saddo ageing rebel types
- a pathetic transgression for losers
- ironic representations of old-school rebels



# Ironic Retro Preaching

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- ironic, over-the-top preaching
- threats of hellfire and brimstone
- over-claim of penalties
- retro styling



# Big Overclaim

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- impossibly huge claims of the benefits of binning litter
- binning will make you smarter, sexier, blessed by an angel, rich beyond your wildest dreams etc
- ironic approaches to morality and reward



# Slob Awards

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- means of kids getting at adults
- nominating parents/teachers as 'Slob of the Year'
- littering as a thing that only scuzzy adults do....

