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Wisconsin Film Festival: 'Art & Copy' not a commercial interruption

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Filmmaker Doug Pray was at the Wisconsin Film Festival to show 'Art & Copy' to the crowd Thursday. - imdb.com

Talk about a mixed message.

"Art & Copy," an entertaining documentary about advertising that showed Thursday night at the Wisconsin Film Festival, makes me either want to smash my satellite dish or drink milk.

Such is the power of the images we see before us on a constant basis. Done right, they make us want to act. Done poorly, even the people who make ads for a living want to keep them away from their kids.

Filmmaker Doug Pray was at the festival to show the film to a hometown crowd on Thursday, thrilled that people filled the seats at the Wisconsin Union Theater and laughed in all the right places.

And it was easy to laugh. For starters, "Art & Copy" pulled out some of the iconic ads of various generations. When they're done right, they are funny; now that "Where's the beef?" hasn't been seen in about 20 years, it is kind of amusing again. When they're done right, they also move you the way that the Reagan "It's morning in America" campaign ad makes you want to raise a flag and kick the snot out of the Soviet Union.

Pray's film is far more than a regurgitation of great advertising. That's for a TV special. "Art & Copy" was made in conjunction with The One Club, a kind of hall of fame for advertisers. The subjects of his film are the greats in the business, the ones who came up with iconic campaigns such as Nike's "Just Do It," Volkswagen Beetle ads from the 1960s, the often-lampooned "Got Milk?" and the legendary 1984 Apple ad that ran just once, during the Super Bowl.

"They feel they have an impact on society," Pray said after the film. "That was kind of news to me."

These are visionaries who go beyond selling their products. They are messing with our emotions, befriending us and trying to connect with things people yearn for.

"I put something in people's face to make them feel something," one ad man says.

Pray doesn't simply celebrate this stuff. He intersperses his film with the kind of stats that make one want to smash a television and take a break from the media. Seventy-five percent of U.S. households have three or more TVs. American children are exposed to 20,000 advertisements a year. There are more than 500 satellite channels in the U.S.

Yet the advertisements are there, like the air. There's no going back. So instead of having them be the kind of drivel people hate, Pray says in person and through his film, why not aim higher? The subjects of "Art & Copy" try to lift their medium to this day, with things like distinctive iPod ads.

The advertisers in the film get this across to the audience and also sold that notion to the filmmaker, who called them "inspiring."

"It accepts that there is advertising," Pray said. "And why can't it be better?"

The hall of famers would be proud.