

Oral History Interview

with

ED VORKAPICH

November 23, 1984

at

New York City

By Scott Ellsworth

For the "Pepsi Generation" Oral History Project

Archives Center

National Museum of American History

Smithsonian Institution

TAPE ABSTRACT AND INDEX

Vorkapich, Ed. New York, New York, November 23, 1984.
Interviewed by Scott Ellsworth.

Ed Vorkapich is a New York based filmmaker who directed a number of commercials for Pepsi in the 1960s and 1970s. He led one of the two camera crews who crossed America shooting film for the "Live/Give" advertising campaign.

The interview focuses on Mr. Vorkapich's work for Pepsi. Among the topics addressed are: his artistic influences; changes in filmmaking technology; "backlighting and other visual effects; The "Live/Give" campaign; film crew organization; relations with Pepsi and Batten, Barton, Durstine and Osborn (BBDO); artistic freedom at Pepsi; work for Coca-Cola; imagery in Pepsi advertisements; casting; Native Americans in advertising; and the influence of his work for Pepsi.

The interview was conducted at Mr. Vorkapich's studio in New York City.

Abstract of interview with Ed Vorkapich New York City November 14, 1984
Interviewer: Scott Ellsworth

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:50

SUMMARY OF VORKAPICH'S WORK WITH PEPSI

He started with the Pepsi-Cola Company in about 1966 on the "Girlywatchers" campaign. He worked on "Taste That Beats the Others Cold - Pepsi Pours It On" campaign and on Mountain Dew commercials. Vorkapich created a different style. He shot two sporty scenes in an aesthetic way and made them beautiful. There was some opposition to this. They shot commercials on the beach past four o'clock p.m. using lots of high speed footage, trampolines and back lighting.

3:30

INNOVATIONS IN SHOOTING

Still photographers and cameramen taught in the Hollywood style were rigid in the kind of lighting they would use. They wouldn't shoot after 4:00 p.m. Vorkapich worked with Bert Stern. Irving Penn did the most to change the look of photography. There was much freedom for people in the business at the time. On the "Pepsi Free" campaign, Vorkapich began working with Alan Pottasch. The last year he worked with Mountain Dew he was told it was the best work he'd done. Kendall wanted to meet Vorkapich. As soon as you get close to the client the agency doesn't like it.

7:10

BACKGROUND

Vorkapich was known for being avant-garde in color-work. His father was a filmmaker in Hollywood. Vorkapich met Stern in the Korean War. He formed a company with Bert Stern, in which they were going to have lots of creative freedom. Vorkapich's breakthrough was a Beechnut commercial in which there were a lot of "sunbursts," kids, action, and backlighting.

8:55

"YOU'VE GOT ALOT TO LIVE - PEPSI'S GOT ALOT TO GIVE"

Vorkapich and Jerry Shore worked on "You've Got Alot to Live Pepsi Got Alot to Give." Each one went across the country shooting thousands of feet of film for the campaign's commercials. Pottasch gave them

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extreme freedom. These commercials showed the positive side of America. Some people said, "Why don't you show America the way it really is?" They shot a lot of material of American Indians on this cross-country trip which was never used.

15:15

PEPSI NEEDED ALL-AMERICAN IMAGE

Coke had an all-American image. Vorkapich had to try to take that away from them to get a part of their market. Until that time Pepsi had very structured commercials, so Vorkapich decided to be very free. These early Pepsi commercials were copied up until about 1983.

16:20

STRUCTURE OF CREATIVE CREW

In the 1960s directors/cameramen and editors had a lot of power. The jobs of the directors and cameramen was to find the right faces and the right locations. Then the editors put it all together with the music. Today editors are instructed exactly how to edit.

18:20

COMMERCIALS TOTALLY UNSTRUCTURED

After being given the initial idea, directors had control. They had a lot of power. On the "Girlwatcher" commercial Vorkapich was only told to use a girl in an airport. Sites "Rope Swing" as another example.

20:30

PEPSI ADS WERE PEOPLE ORIENTED

After being told to shoot a commercial fashioned after Jonathan Livingston Seagull they discovered Pepsi needed emotional people-shots. During the shooting for the bike commercial leaves were thrown in the air in slow motion. No one had written that down, but that became the main focus and title of the commercial. The producers in the 1960s questioned Vorkapich's judgement but his creative directors kept the producers at bay.

24:05

AGENCY AND PEPSI'S ROLE IN MAKING THE ADS

Alan Pottasch and John Corbani from Pepsi-Cola would attend shoots. The agency did not have much to do with making the commercials. Vorkapich spoke directly with Pepsi people and that was probably what

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got him into trouble with BBDO. Vorkapich was in total control. He usually didn't stick to the storyboard. Now, if you don't cover the board, you get into trouble with the agency. The agency put jingles together and sold the client on the idea.

What made these commercials work was having the right people, expressions, and faces. Now commercials are very designed -- "over designed" -- and highly structured, usually referred to as the "English look."

28:45

HOW HE DEVELOPED HIS STYLE

In the Korean War Vorkapich was a cameraman in the Army 1950-53, covering the war. He would create his own stories while he was in the field. He used the film as his father taught him to, as a visual media, not a literary one.

Tape 1, Side 2

:10

KOREAN WAR SHOOTING

Burt Stern and Vorkapich were making the story up as they went along. They learned which images worked. It didn't matter if the people were stars or not.

2:05

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PEPSI AND COKE ADVERTISING

Before working with Pepsi Vorkapich worked with Coca-Cola, whose commercials were extremely structured and rigid, with sharply defined storylines. Sites example of a girl meeting a guy in a gas station. They made these up as they went along, using images that they knew would work. Certain images, such as a pretty girl running towards the camera in slow-motion, always elicited a warm response from the audience.

Sites a few examples of spontaneous shots that worked because of the freedom he had working for Pepsi.

4:55

NATIVE AMERICANS IN ADVERTISING

Example of client who wanted a commercial with a Native American in it. Vorkapich wanted to show Indian art and the art director wanted to show an Indian studying. Vorkapich felt this was pretentious and wrong.

6:50

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR CASTING

Casting decisions were made by both the agency and the client. Vorkapich did a commercial with a black couple. He told the people at the agency he would shoot it his way and any decisions they made from there would be editorial. Vorkapich did all-Black commercials in South America. He shot Pele commercials there. Commercials were considered less serious then. Now it's much more complicated, because it is such a big business.

10:50

STEREOTYPES IN COMMERCIALS

Essentially these images are perpetuated by the men making the commercials.

13:40

HE GOT TOO CLOSE TO THE CLIENT

Don Kendall asked to meet Vorkapich. This made the agency very uncomfortable. Kendall told him that the commercials he did were the best Pepsi and Mountain Dew ads ever done. After that the agency did not ask Vorkapich to do any more commercials. When a client gets very close to a director the agency starts worrying that the client is going to think, "Why are we paying all these people if this guy is doing all the work?"

Also there was a misunderstanding between Vorkapich and a producer on a project. The client asked if Vorkapich wanted the producer fired and Vorkapich said no. That decision was a mistake and contributed to Vorkapich being taken off the account.

21:15

INFLUENCED BY ART

He grew up with art. His father was a painter. Now Vorkapich is creating beauty and fashion advertisements, which uses sexual imagery. Jontue is the second biggest perfume in the world due to one of his shots with horses. Vorkapich had to fight to keep that shot in that commercial.

23:45

CHANGING DRINK FOR SHOOTING

When they started shooting Coke commercials Coke gave them a formula they were supposed to use to dilute the soda to make it look good on camera. Bert Stern

suggested they just use a real bottle of Coke and use backlighting to make it look good. It worked perfectly.

26:45

CASTING

Pepsi would advertise for certain types of people in the local papers of the towns where they shot. Coke was a bit of a problem because they were so strict. They had a long list of standards they imposed on their ad makers. Example of them casting a commercial with a girl and Coke people said they couldn't use her because she didn't have "Coca-Cola length" hair.

Tape 2, Side 1

1:00

PEPSI MADE INNOVATIONS POSSIBLE

Experimental shooting is important in developing new ideas. Pepsi was always very generous with money for campaigns. Shooting for a month usually cost about one hundred thousand dollars. Now it can be as high as two hundred thousand dollars for one week's shooting.

6:00

USE OF SMALL CAMERAS

They used an Aeroflex camera and an Imar combat camera because they were so small and versatile. Most people were using huge set ups, which made everything more complex. The state of the art was actually simplicity.

7:10

MODERN FILMS ARE INFLUENCED BY VORKAPICH'S STYLE

Today, Hollywood cameramen that are considered to be good were either directly or indirectly influenced by Vorkapich's style. Stars want to look like the people filmed in those commercials. Lighting makes a big difference. "Easy Rider" was one of the first Hollywood films to adopt his style. Many well known directors once worked in advertising. Bert Stern, who did the famous Smirnoff Vodka campaign, was a real innovator. Vorkapich and he worked a lot together. They were rebels in the business. Reiteration of difference between past & present in ad business. Director used to have almost complete authority and creative freedom.

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17:10

REFLECTION ON PEPSI

Pepsi-Cola Co. was extremely generous to Vorkapich. Kendall asked him up to Purchase, New York. Vorkapich assumed that he would be asked to do the next Pepsi commercials. He believes that he got too close to the client for the agency's taste.

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