

# CREATIVITY

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## THE SEVEN WONDERS TRAKTOR'S LONG DAY IN THE SUN

THE TOP DIRECTORS REPORT  
+  
KNIGHT AND WIENEN ON NIKE'S  
CREATIVE LEGACY





# EXPLORING THE STRANGE COLLECTIVE GENIUS THAT IS

There aren't many people in advertising who could claim to have had a whole lot of fun over the past year or so, yet the commercials collective known as Traktor, unsurprisingly, sees things entirely differently. Traktor calls the past year one of their most prolific and creatively exciting, and a quick assessment of their labors over the past 18 months or so would support such an assertion. Recently, the team has applied its joint skills to work for Tango and Heineken for CHI, London; a surprising turn for the high-profile Berlin Cameron Coke campaign; a futuristic epic

Another Day," the latest in the weighty body of promo work that forms the second leg of the Traktor filmed entertainment stool.

After building a body of assumption-challenging work in Sweden, and crafting the Grand Prix-winning Diesel campaign "Little Rock/5 a.m. Mono Village" in 1997, the Swedish collective carved out a niche and a name in the

# TRAKTOR

for Xelebri through Mother; and a pair of nice Nike bookends — last summer's acclaimed Franco-fabulous Presto campaign and a new spot in the works at press time. With a new Levi's spot through BBH due out in July, Sweden's Group of Seven has put another 60 seconds of film between themselves and the fading notion that there are limits to the kinds of spots appropriate to their precision madness.

"The sheer variety of fun stuff has been startling in the past year," says Traktor, and yes, all quotes will be attributed to the collective, which, while assigning two of their number to any given film, works together as a liberally lubricated machine on every project. And, not inconsequentially, fun is part of the Traktor ethic, something that is not only employed to entertain legions at their wrap parties, but something that informs every project they tackle. It's a great thing to remember, in the ad industry circa 2003 — that advertising is supposed to be fun, that ad creators and audiences feed off it, and that it can exist fruitfully alongside brand and business smarts. For the guys who unforgettably interpreted the spank-happy, forest dwelling Scandinavians, odious villains who win the gunfights, wrathful bellies and chickens and the cover of this magazine, the guys who turned American culture upside down, sideways and upside up again may be the smartest guys in advertising. Smart for reinventing themselves, smart for working on real ideas and smart for having more fun doing it than anyone else.

After all, fun is funner when you do crazy shit that is actually good work, that clients and awards show juries can both love. Traktor has earned every known award, including two Cannes Grand Prix nods in five years — for Diesel and for Fox Sports. They head into this summer as strong contenders again for that particular honor, with Nike Presto, and a reel full of work that marks them as leading pop culture interpreters and reinvention artists. As if making a symbolic statement to that effect, Traktor worked with Madonna on the superb video for "Die

U.S. with what is still eye-watering work for MTV and Miller Lite. Since then, the seven-man ad army has wrought hundreds of spots, which, arguably, have altered the lens through which viewers inside and outside of the bosom of the industry experience ad images. Traktor helped define and then rode the wave of a comedy zeitgeist but also delivered something real in each spot. Real, you ask? A glance at their plump as a sausage reel reveals an array of work that's not all mustaches and locked-off shots and chunky brown guys. It's as stylistically diverse as it is ad savvy. With few exceptions, no matter how skewed the image, the visual morsels on show aren't gratuitous but reinforce the self-contained universe created by a painstaking attention to casting, art direction and, most importantly, the idea. Those who work with the directors will attest to the combination of fun and furious adherence to the ad idea they lay down on each job. "Knowing them and working with them before, I've always thought they are the most intelligent and responsible directors around," says BBH/New York CD Thomas Hayo. "When you work with them, they are really aware of the challenges, of what needs to be done for the product and the brand. They understand how advertising works." While the latest work extends their range further — Levi's gives us an action/adventure epic with a twist and complicated camera moves; and Coke gave us "Real" slices of life — Traktor had already accumulated a broad range of work. Spots for Nordstrom's and Euro work for Volvo already started to take the team into, if not always gentler, then more characterized stories.

BBH's Hayo acknowledges the new Levi's spot, "Car," is not standard Traktor fare in the traditional sense, but that recruiting the directors for this action romp made perfect sense given the subtleties the Swedes bring to the party but don't always get credit for. And while the spot in question is more cinematic blockbuster than much of the work in the Traktor oeuvre,



vre, Hayo says the film also required character finesse. "They made sure the script didn't take itself too seriously. It is quite action packed, there are a lot of stunts and it has a male protagonist. We needed to have the adrenaline-fueled stuff, but at the same time inject subtle touches of humor. They may not have been the most obvious choice, but for us it was as important to get the character right because there is always a danger of overplaying the cool filmic aspects of things and forgetting that the most important thing for the audience is to connect with the lead guy in it."

The ingredients necessary to change such things, and the thread running through their work, according to Traktor: "Attention to detail. Obsession with comic timing. A fondness for

## INFLUENCES

Energetically cultural artifacts that are not commercials. Such as: Romantic comedies. Erotic Polaroids by feisty German ladies with hairy armpits. Poetry about the futility of love. Spike Jonze. Issues of the *Robb Report* from the early '90s.

Spike Jonze



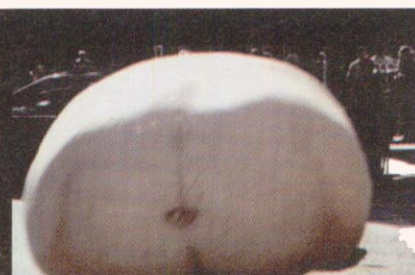
casting. Great wrap parties." At least three of those elements were evident in the enduring Jukka Bros. spots for MTV. Those ads, created by Traktor's countrymen Linus Karlsson and Paul Malmstrom from Fallon, gave viewers something that they weren't expecting to see, something perhaps they didn't really want to see, but something that once seen, seeped into places unstimulated by most of the images of the day, creating a pineal craving for repeated exposure. And unlike most '90s artifacts, it causes the same troubling pleasure when viewed today. "It was possibly the most insane material you could hand over to a director," says Goodby CD Jamie Barrett, who worked on the MTV campaign while at Fallon. "They captured the insanity but they did it in a well-thought out way. There is a method to their madness; they are among the most disciplined directors I've worked with." Barrett recently teamed with the collective again on Goodby's Saturn campaign, with the poignantly comic scenes played out in "Box," representing yet another stylistic layer for the boys. With the spots after "Sheet Metal," Barrett says Saturn was starting to develop a look and a feel, and that successive spots needed to capture the same spirit without being in lockstep stylistically. "We thought it was something that could be in Traktor's sweet spot. People think of them as being out there, but their actual film has this odd honest quality to it. It has a point of view to it but it never feels commercial-y or overly art directed." While the idea is lovingly supported, Traktor ads don't feel like ads, asserts Barrett. "For me, 80 percent of the ads you see you dismiss in the first couple of seconds because there are visual cues that let you know you're watching a commercial production. With Traktor, because of a combination of details, from their casting to literally the T-shirt they choose to the unstudied way they shoot things, it gives a quality that is, still, quite distinctive out there in commercials land."

Those details spill out from every frame of Traktor films, which makes the team particularly adept at nailing a look and a feel. A new Lynx spot out of BBH/London had, according to BBH producer Emma Fewtrell, this thorny assortment of requirements: "top-notch casting and high-fashion styling, but also an element of reality and humor; it couldn't be too slice-of-life or doc,

## ON WORK

"Never take the shortcuts. Keep pushing the padded envelope until the gray fuzzy padding comes raining down over your sandwich!"

Reebok's "Beer Belly"



but it also couldn't be too cartoony or glossy. We felt they were the ones to address all those points, really."

But delivering on such tall production orders requires a clear view on what a story should be. "We look for clear ideas that are executable in the format they are intended. That is, not cramming too many ideas into 30 seconds," says Traktor. "They don't have to be overtly comic, but they should involve some core aspect that guides the decisionmaking and that you can cling to when the committees start second-guessing. This allows you to maximize the script's potential. Having said that, on the first Tuesday of every month we'll say yes to anything. When relevant, we also like being able to create a universe with its own twisted logic. This logic (or lack of it) can be applied to the actual production process as well as to the story itself and can lead to unexpected and glorious results." The Traktor universe is peopled by a startlingly broad array of characters, reflecting the team's holistic approach to and heavy emphasis on casting. The approach can be summed up as, "Quantity. As well as searching in unexpected cities at the margins of the axis of kindness." Traktor believe that people like to see "themselves" on TV,

## ON ANGRY CHICKEN

"We wanted to create an earnestly ludicrous and pragmatic chase that was a celebration of the urban athletes without resorting to slow motion and lingering shots of rippling muscles. We'll do that when we reach midlife next April. The creatives had a great reference in the shape of a documentary with the parallel translation in the voiceover. This made us chuckle, and it still does. The trick is not to treat the chicken as a cartoon, or the proceedings as somehow a doddle. Urban chases are no joke. Unless you wear a funny hat."

Nike's "Angry Chicken"



"rather than artificial people they cannot relate to. We don't necessarily let the cast know that this is comedy and the characters shouldn't know that they are funny. They should get on with it and let the audience have the enjoyment."

For the youth-centered "Real" spots for Coke, Traktor cast from thou-

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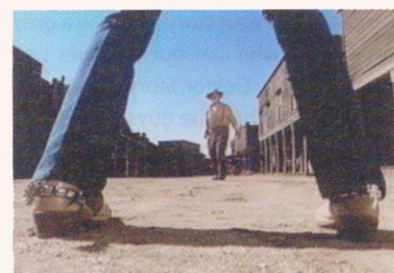
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sands of real kids, allowing the chosen cast to bond for a few days before the shoot. Being recruited for the anticipated campaign through Coke's new creative partner, Berlin Cameron, carried its own challenges. "Making something 'real' is sometimes tricky," says Traktor. "It becomes almost harder than creating 'fantasy' because everybody has a very individual and subjective notion of what 'real' actually is, especially in connection with the biggest brand in the world. "We tried to obtain a sense of spontaneity and 'discovered' moments. In short, we shot a lot of film."

The quiet Coke stories were perhaps the most obvious departure from what is most associated with the Traktor heritage of irony-fueled mayhem. But it was just another notch in some already very notchy belts. The talent for surprising has always been there, says Partizan chief Steve Dickstein. "The greatest talents are those who constantly reinvent themselves; just when people have

them pegged, they become moving targets," says Dickstein. "They are great at what they do and they always offer up a new, fun or interesting perspective."

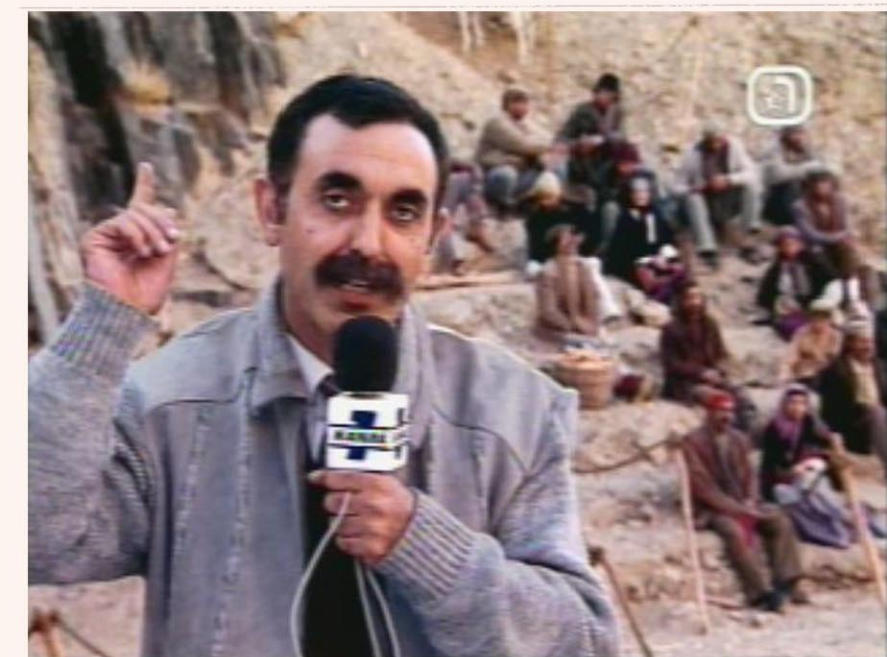
Based on their early work out of Swedish agencies, Traktor had developed a certain look, though nobody would have accused the then six-member team of putting up wallpaper. An early spot for Peppe's Pizza features a perky lass feeding the creatures in her aquarium — creatures that happen to be chubby, fang-toothed humanoid monsters. Spots for OLV Cheez Doodles out of Paradiset DDB riff on B sci-fi and introduce the weirdsexy casting and design knack that would serve the troupe well over the next several years. But with the Diesel "Little Rock" spot, Traktor, in another pairing with Paradiset, would cross a whole new set of lines. The spot takes place in the Wild West, with the good guy/bad guy gunfight redrawn in ways both subtle and drastic, turning American mythopoetic tradition on its ear, with a twist. It may have been



Diesel's "Little Rock"



Levi's "Badger"



**Agency:** Wieden + Kennedy, Amsterdam

**Creative directors:** Susan Hoffman and Carlos Bayala

**Copywriter:** Mike Byrne

**Art director:** Danielle Flagg

**Production company:** Partizan, London

**Directors:** Traktor



unknown territory for American advertising, but whatever it was, it picked up speed and the ideas and imagery kept challenging ad norms, as demonstrated in the ESPN spot "Heidi," from Wieden, and the Miller Lite campaign, culminating in the truly foreign "Evil Beaver." While Traktor are cagey about deconstructing this particular cultural moment, they will chalk it up to a commingling of Swedish and American ad ethics delivered with the skewed yet uniquely clear perspective of the outsider. "The intention has always been to tell a funny story as clearly as possible, rather than to employ overtly flashy visuals in order to make everyone involved feel virile. We see a lot of beauty in comic timing and unexpected twists. We actually never knew what irony meant. We have since looked it up, and immediately switched to 'flashy visual splendor,' which makes our sales reps happy." But no, really. "Perhaps it was refreshing that comedy did not have to involve broad gestures, wacky casting,



wide-angle lenses and strong primary colors. The tingling sensation of the double take and the jolt of the new, camouflaged as old."

The Swedish side of the equation was nurtured by the country's relatively short history of commercial broadcasting and a hands-free approach to regulation. "In the Nordic countries there was no commercial TV until relatively recently. Commercials were exclusively shot for a captive audience in the cinema. You had a duty to entertain, or else the screen would be showered with projectile herrings as you were taking up the valuable time of social democrats, who were already angry about many things. Due to the faltering economy, there was not much knowledge about moving the camera or even editing. This led to an economy of storytelling that put the onus on comic timing and 'observed' merriment. These commercials tended to be longer and gave more room for storytelling. That is how we grew up. There are also very few laws

on how to make commercials in Sweden. No lawyers involved." Against this fruitful backdrop, the Traktor collective sprang from film school in Stockholm in 1991 before their reel was spotted by Georges Bermann of Partizan in Paris. Given Traktor made such a scene with their early work, and with the industry's proclivity to eat itself, the collective has done well not to be sucked into the vortex of its own pigeonhole. "In a way, we never left that classroom," they say. "We learn every day." "They've done quite a range of work, but I think with a lot of their work it's spot-on for the product and it feels quite effortless," says Hayo. "It's smart and intelligent and there are always great touches, but overall it never tries too hard." "Their work is certainly distinctive, and it's often unexpected and it has an edge that one wouldn't necessarily expect from a particular piece of film; and it always complements the creative idea because it's looking at it a different way — it's a more innovative way of telling a story," says Moving Picture Company deputy managing director Mark Benson. MPC



Madonna's "Die Another Day"

has been Traktor's longtime effects partner, working on spots from the "5 a.m." Diesel spot, Lowe/London's Labatt Ice and Reebok's "Blob," the award-winning Fatboy Slim "Ya Mama" and "Where's Your Head At" video for Basement Jaxx to the current Xelebri spot from Mother, a magnum opus of seamless effects trickery (see p. 65). Benson says Traktor's particular genius lies in their ability to meet the most complicated visual challenge by breaking it down into simple principles. Add to this, says MPC post producer Graham Bird, meticulous planning before and during production. Such qualities have meant that the directors' work avoids the capital-E effects look that can appear like an oily shine on the prettiest spots. Says Bird, "they are strong enough directorially that their natural gift for humor and casting and the strength of their direction tends to overshadow any effects work."

Ten years into the ride, Traktor has maintained the garden fresh per-

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SPECIAL REPORT DIRECTORS

**TRAKTOR** continued from page 57      spectively and continue to take "every banal and ludicrous element of commercials production incredibly seriously."

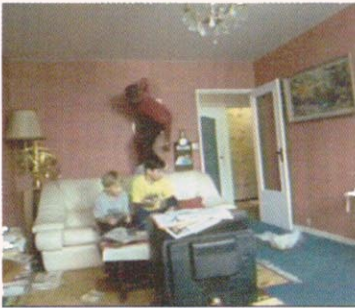
"They are disciplined advertising directors," says Dickstein. "They're sleeves-rolled-up guys doing proper battle for great ideas." So perhaps that will be the only remaining trademark as they expand their storytelling horizons. "For a while there may have been a Traktor look, as we weren't quite sure how to move the camera," says the collective. "However, if you look at the past dozen jobs, you would be hard put to find a look. Or so we hope."

Says Dickstein, the unifying element derives from a Traktor spirit. "There are very few directors who manage that ever-youthful delight in what they are doing, where you are surprised and delighted, where you say, 'Wow I hadn't looked at the world that way.' It's not just how they execute it, it's actually how they look at it and therefore execute it."

In other words, they're having fun. "They are very professional and good at what they do, but at the same time they have a good time doing it," says Hayo. "The whole process is very up and in the end that shows in the work they do."

The next obvious move is into features, of course, though not even the burly heft of Traktor's directorial skills could save them from Hollywood hell on their first go. The collective's first feature, *Chain of Fools*, though reportedly a competent first outing, did not see the darkness of theaters. Currently, they are working on adapting feature projects from optioned books. For now, they'll focus on the 25 or so projects a year that keeps them busy and keeps the ad industry bowling and laughing and, one day soon, "will descend on Hollywood with the rabid fervor of Santa Claus on absinthe."

Traktor sums up with a golden nugget that could serve as the basis of a health-restoring philosophy for an ailing ad industry. "After having done over 400 commercials the challenge remains to somehow keep developing. We love to work with people that believe in the chain of trust. When the client trusts the agency and the CD trusts the creative team. When they trust us and the people we have chosen to work with on the project, the best work happens. Let's hug." ■



Nike Presto's "Angry Chicken"

