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# Dossier: Screen Advertising

# Introduction

Emily Caston

The purpose of this dossier is to ask, "What is screen advertising and what relevance, if any, does it have for film and television studies?" Both are large and complex questions, but the second is perhaps the bolder and, therefore, a question that will remain unanswered. It invokes a larger conversation about the nature of film studies in the academy since it emerged within the paradigm of literary studies in Britain and the USA in the 1970s. To answer these questions, the dossier presents interviews with three influential figures from screen advertising production, two reports about advertising archives and an article about the industry in Britain since 1955.

By the concept of screen advertising, I denote the moving image films which have been commissioned by brands in order to be viewed by the general public; as a result of the impact on or modification of their behaviour arising from the public's engagement with these films, the brands aim to achieve an increase in their *brand value*. The commissioning of these films began in the late Victorian era (Taylor, "Fascinating Show"; Foutch) and continued through the early decades of cinema, the First World War, through the transition to synch sound and the Second World War to the postwar era when, in Britain, they became the funding source for commercial television. Though advertising agencies of a sort had existed since the eighteenth century (Fletcher), and the globalisation and rapid growth of agencies occurred before the two World Wars, it was in the 1950s in the USA (following the first broadcast of TV commercials in 1941), and the 1960s in the UK (following the 1955 launch of commercial television) that a standardised supply chain with institutionalised contracts between professional trade associations emerged (Fletcher; Clulely).

Interest in screen advertising has grown in recent years within the move to study commissioned film and useful cinema. Hongwei Thorn Chen and Sophia Gräfe provide an extremely useful overview and a reading list of this scholarship which began with pioneering works such as Anthony Slide's *Before Video* (published in 1992). Foremost among the works focussing specifically on screen advertising are the collections *Films that Sell* (Vonderau et al.), *Advertising and the Transformation of Screen Cultures* (Florin et al.) and Jeremy W. Groskopf's historical analysis of advertising in cinemas which demonstrated that the "spot" commercial did not originate on television, but had already become a standard of cinema advertising by 1916. Other notable contributions include Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe's editorial collections, Tom Rice's work on colonial film, Patrick Russell and James Piers Taylor's book on documentary and industrial film, Amy Sargeant's and James G. Mansell and Scott Anthony's work on the GPO Unit, Vincenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau's *Films That Work*, Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson's *Useful Cinema*, the collection *Learning with*

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*the Lights Off* by Devin Orgeron and others, and Wasson and Grieveson's important work on military film.

Until recently, screen advertising has been sidelined in film and television studies. As Malcom Cook and Kirsten Moana Thompson have shown, advertising was a prominent part of film culture at the dawn of the twentieth century, the era of trick films (2) and animation played a vital role in the history of advertising. Michael Cowan's work on Walter Ruttmann and Weimar advertising films ("Absolute Advertising"; "Taking"; "From") and Desmond O'Rawe's scholarship on Len Lye's are evidence of some of the research that has been conducted. But Cook and Thompson observe that in general "animation historians and scholars have […] tended to privilege animated entertainment or art over animation created for commercial purposes" (7). They cite Crafton's otherwise "ground-breaking" research on Oskar Fischinger's work as an illustration of this, and declare an intuition to challenge the "marginalisation of advertising" advocating "a recognition of its fundamental and persistent role" (7).

My article looks at narrative and duration in British television commercials after 1955. It picks up on issues raised in scholarship on early film about the role of spectacle and narrative in short form, the breakthrough contribution of the useful cinema paradigm, and analyses the compressed narrative form that emerged in the 1960s and has survived the transition to digital. It is based on interviews and archival research on the industry made possible by a British Academy grant (2021–2023). The following paper in this collection is a report by Steven Foxon, the Curator of Non-Fiction at the British Film Institute National Film Archive, previously the Curator of Advertising and Publicity Films at the BFI. The British Film Institute holds a position in the UK, alongside that of the History of Advertising Trust, of conserving the nation's screen advertising. In his report, Steve Foxon examines the parameters of this collection and discusses issues such as rights clearance, orphan films, and other topics worthy of academic attention and research.

Juliette Larthe's interview helps us to understand the progressive and radical role that advertising can play in social change, illustrating some of the controversial issues of which Harrison has recently written and challenging commonplace, commonly held views that cultural representation in advertising tends to be regressive. The next interview is with Georgia Hudson, one of a new generation of female screen advertising directors. Despite the *Free the Bid* initiative originating in the USA, women are underrepresented amongst directors and agency creatives. Her interview illuminates the creative process involved in challenging cultural representation. To view the sports commercials directed by Hudson, having read Sarah Gordon's work on gender in sports clothing advertising 1870–1925, is to engage with some of the fundamental and seismic social changes that have taken place in fashion advertising in the last one hundred years.[1] Daniel Kleinman's interview illustrates a number of ways in which screen advertising is relevant to this broader ambition of understanding the film and television industries, not only because his direction of no less than eight James Bond title sequences demonstrates the overlaps between the different supply chains in the screen industries, but also because he talks in his interview about the post-production sector which has been a driver of the Research and development (R&D) function of screen advertising (Caston, "Pioneers").[2]

The notion of "heritage" became a widespread way to describe conservation objects in the last quarter of the twentieth century (Muñoz-Viñas 37). British screen content, whether photographs, family 35mm, or corporate and industrial film, has structured the ways in which audiences visualise colonial relations (Holland and Sandon; Ramamurthy; Faulker and

Ramamurthy). The participation of British screen advertising in institutionalised constructions of "race" and "race relations" cannot be overlooked, as Anandi Ramamurthy and Kalpana Wilson have demonstrated. Recent years have seen an increase in valuable literature on cultural representation in advertising, with David Ciarlo's important work on racial constructions in the advertising of the Weimar Republic in Germany and Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe's already mentioned edited collections on British Colonial Film. But as Knox has noted, very little has been written about representations of the Chinese on British screens, less still, with the exception of Paul Bowman, on screen advertising. Sally Chan's essay in this dossier examines the experience of the "silent minority" of the Chinese community, exploring the ways in which the representation of Chinese culture in such mainstream screen content as *The Chinese Detective* (1981–1982) manifested in the construction and exploitation of stereotyping of the Chinese community in British advertising through the 1990s and 2000s.

What is the relevance of screen advertising for film and television studies? Having a strong archive and corpus of scholarship enables scholars to engage in the analysis of intermedial relations (Bruhn and Gielsvik), remediation (Bolter and Grusin), and archeologies of screen media (Parikka). The Heineken "Refreshes the Parts …" campaign of the 1980s was one of the earliest campaigns to appeal to the viewer as a viewer rather than viewer-as-drinker. Many screen commercials carry references to stories, characters and scenes from films and dramas made for cinema and television, such as *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931) and *Star Trek* (NBC, 1967–1969). Ridley Scott's "1984" commercial for Apple drew on the dystopian atmosphere of *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). Visual (or "screen") literacy, and cultural constructions of race and gender are not born of feature film and high tend television alone but of the panoply of overlapping interactions with screen media on multiple platforms. Thompson's essay on intermediality in colour and animation advertising of Times Square in the early twentieth century illustrates what can be achieved historically by embracing multiple screen media in an analysis of technology, creativity and public leaps in visual perception and interpretation.

The discussion opens underlying questions about the film studies curriculum. I previously suggested that advertising had been neglected because it sat at the base of a cultural hierarchy of screen industries (Caston, "Pioneers"). Feature films had been placed at the top of the hierarchy in the 1970s within a paradigm of literary criticism in order to legitimise films as a valid and worthy subject of scholarship in the academy (Grieveson and Wasson). Thomas Kuhn wrote that in times of "normal science", academics conduct research within a consensually agreed paradigm comprising theoretical concepts, research methods and an agreed body of evidence. We are in the midst of a paradigm shift, a Cowan has observed ("From"). Henry K. Miller has described in detail the moment at the Slade when the previous paradigm was hammered out and, in the process, all the issues that it exposed. Grieveson has written that the serious study of film as art within universities was hailed with the formation of the Society of Cinematology in 1958 and 1959 ("Discipline" 168). But the last decade has seen a rise in discourse on the subject's perceived disintegration. In their collection *Inventing Film Studies*, Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson write of the "widespread sense of uncertainty and, in part, insecurity about the future of film study" which has accompanied the "proliferation of moving image forms and cultures" ("Academy" vxii); but set out to demonstrate that "the ideal of consolidation and clear identity often implied by conventional histories of film studies" is belied by "the fragmented nature of the field" in the past ("Academy" vxii). But that we are still far from including screen industries other than film (all too often taken as synonymous with "cinema") is illustrated by such recent articles as Andrew Spicer's "Writing Film History", which proposes a revision of content, methods and paradigm that is profoundly

cinema-centric. Naturally, studying "useful cinema" is also going to be a key component of social, political and economic histories of the twentieth century and beyond because of the centrality of film to corporate capitalist communications, as Grieveson argues (*Cinema*). Rice's work on the Colonial Film Board illustrates this.

In conclusion, any attempt to establish a paradigm through which an aesthetic criticism of screen advertising might be appreciated is beyond the bounds of this dossier. The concept of "screen studies" is more widely used today, alongside that of the "screen school" which many universities have launched, in recognition of the larger changes that have taken place. Screen advertising is a core part of this new screen studies. There is today an increasingly widespread consensus that film studies needs to include and address not only television but non-auteur-based commissioned film, for that alone affords curators, archivists, historians of film and aesthetic critics of film to participate in full understanding not only of the causation and production of film, but of the ways in which films are interpreted by audiences.

## Dedication

This dossier is dedicated to Ringan Ledwidge. Ringan was going to be interviewed for the dossier but sadly passed away before this was possible. Danny Kleinman and Johnny Frankel, who cofounded and ran the production company Rattling Stick with him, are working with curator Steve Foxon to create a collection of his commercials in the British Film Institute National Archives. An obituary based on his career was published by the BFI (Caston, "Somewhere").



**Figure 1: Ringan Ledwidge 1971–2021.**

## Notes

[1] On this topic, see also Nick Rees-Roberts.

[2] See also Robert Crawford on the same phenomenon in Australia.

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