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Title	Profit Margins: The American Silent Cinema and the Marginalization of Advertising, by Jeremy Groskopf
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Publication date	2024-07-02
Original Citation	Curry, J. (2024) 'Profit Margins: The American Silent Cinema and the Marginalization of Advertising, by Jeremy Groskopf', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 27, pp. 251–254. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.27.21
Type of publication	Article (not peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.27.21
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Download date	2026-11-16 16:32:50
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/16074



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Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 27, 2024, pp. 251–254
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.27.21

Profit Margins: The American Silent Cinema and the Marginalization of Advertising, by Jeremy Groskopf. Indiana University Academic Press, 2021, 332 pp.

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Jeremy Groskopf's thoughtful publication, *Profit Margins: The American Silent Cinema and the Marginalization of Advertising*, offers a much-needed examination of the symbiotic interplay between early American cinema and advertising from the late 1890s to the late 1920s, spotlighting how silent films served as both a reflection and a catalyst for the burgeoning advertising industry of the early twentieth century. Groskopf's insightful analysis provides a fresh perspective on how silent cinema not only used advertising but was also used by advertisers to reach a broader audience, thereby influencing consumer culture and social norms. Through detailed investigation into the silent film era, including the use of evocative literary terms like *nickelodeon,* which hark back to a time long past, Groskopf unearths its role in developing advertising practices that have since become foundational to the film and theatre industry.

In Chapter One, Groskopf provides a meticulous historical backdrop to American silent cinema, tracing its evolution from nascent film experiments to a fully-fledged industry capable of influencing public opinion and consumer behaviour. Groskopf argues that this period was crucial in developing integrated marketing communications, with silent films incorporating product placements and co-branded content long before these practices became commonplace (30). Specifically, Groskopf names projector slides as the earliest and most cost-effective method for advertising at the time (19). This point is illustrated in the marketing of cars through their integration into chase scenes, enhancing the product's visibility and desirability (Kirby 14). The subtlety of these advertisements often meant that they were seamlessly integrated into the film experience, sometimes without the audience fully realising they were being subjected to advertising. This could enhance the viewing experience by adding layers of realism or excitement with real-world products and manipulating consumer perceptions and desires through cleverly crafted narratives.

One of Groskopf's key contributions, developed expertly in Chapter Two, is his subtle analysis of the strategies used to embed advertisements within film narratives. Groskopf suggests that silent cinema was instrumental in developing foundational advertising strategies, mainly through product placements and narrative integration (104). Films like Fred Newmeyer's *Safety Last!* (1923) subtly promoted wristwatches through Harold Lloyd's iconic clock scene, which contributed to the narrative and showcased a product that captivated the audience (78). In Buster

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Keaton's *The General* (1926), Keaton's brilliant physical comedy was a secondary consideration for transportation companies who used the film to subtly promote train travel as a romantic and adventurous mode of transport (60). These films, along with countless others, show the dual ability of silent films to entertain and persuade, a tactic that, according to Groskopf, was underappreciated in its time but pivotal in the history of advertising. This, Groskopf argues, was also the beginning of advertisement in film trailers (127; Hamel 271). These revolutionary advertising methods offered a template that would be refined and expanded upon in subsequent decades.

Groskopf explores the social implications of these early cinema advertising strategies In Chapter Three, arguing that they reinforced and propagated cultural norms and values of the time. As a dominant form of entertainment, silent films mirrored the societal values and aspirations of their times. Advertisements embedded within these films often emphasised consumerism as a desirable trait, linking it to modernity and success. For example, the frequent portrayal of luxury goods and new technologies made these items symbols of a progressive lifestyle, appealing particularly to urban audiences keen to embrace a modern, consumer-oriented identity (Kirby 6). Groskopf points to the depiction of tobacco in films such as Rex Ingram's *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921) as an example of how these advertising strategies not only boosted the sales of cigarettes but also cemented smoking as a glamorous activity, particularly among the upper classes (95; Kirby 3). This depiction aligns with the arguments by scholars such as Kirby, who notes that film was a powerful medium for normalising consumer products and behaviours (4).

Groskopf further explores the socio-economic dimensions of advertising in silent films in Chapter Three, mainly focusing on how these practices mirrored and perpetuated the social hierarchies of the time. The reach of silent films across different socioeconomic groups meant that advertising had to be nuanced to appeal to diverse audiences. Products were often marketed differently in urban versus rural settings within cinema, reflecting the distinct lifestyles and purchasing powers. These reflections also led to alternative advertising in spaces adjacent to the screen, like trash cans, marketing items provided at screenings, and posters (181). This stratified approach helped cultivate a broader consumer base, tapping into the aspirations of lower-income groups while catering to the affluent's established tastes (Kirby 5). Luxury goods were often featured in films that targeted upper-class audiences, reinforcing class distinctions (89; Kirby 5). This practice helped segment markets according to class and played a role in defining cultural aspirations through cinema. The economic landscape of the silent film era, marked by rapid industrial growth and the rise of mass production, provided a fertile ground for advertising. Film studios and companies saw mutual benefits in collaboration. While studios received funding from product placements and advertisements, companies could access the vast audiences that films attracted. This symbiosis was crucial during periods of economic uncertainty, such as the post-World War I recovery phase, when increased consumer spending was needed to fuel economic recovery (Kirby 7).

Technological advancements in film production are also highlighted in Chapter Three as critical enablers of more sophisticated advertising techniques. Groskopf dedicates a part of the chapter to developing camera techniques that allowed for closer shots of products, enhancing their appeal and embedding them more deeply into the film's narrative structure (120; Walton 71). The technological innovations of the silent film era, such as improved film editing and camera techniques, played a significant role in enhancing the effectiveness of advertisements within films.

Groskopf discusses how these advancements allowed for more seamless and less intrusive product placements (112). Kirby's work supports this view, highlighting how technological enhancements enabled filmmakers to craft more compelling narratives that could integrate advertisements without detracting from the artistic quality of the film (14).

Groskopf concludes with Chapter Four, refocusing on efforts to promote indirect advertisement in film (205). This chapter demonstrates how, despite its strengths and thorough analysis, *Profit Margins* does not extensively address the counterarguments about the potential for over-commercialisation of cinema or the ethical implications of such embedded advertisements, which could have provided a more balanced view (Wenner 105). The manipulation of audience emotions and perceptions for commercial gain raises questions about consumer autonomy and the potential for deception. The degree to which audiences are aware of and consent to the commercial influences within the film can be deceptive because product placements are often not explicitly identified as paid promotions. This can be seen as a failure to respect viewer autonomy by not allowing them an informed choice about their exposure to advertising (Wenner 112). Advertising can influence a filmmaker's artistic integrity, and filmmakers may be pressured to alter scripts, scenes, or themes to accommodate product placements. This commercial influence compromises artistic vision, leading to content that prioritises commercial gain over artistic or narrative quality, potentially sacrificing artistic values for economic benefits, which can detract from films' cultural and aesthetic value (Wenner 106). Scholars like Wenner have explored these and other aspects in depth and criticise the lack of transparency in early film advertisements (Wenner 107).

Profit Margins is a compelling and richly detailed study that broadens the understanding of how silent cinema contributed to the evolution of advertising. Groskopf's work is significant for film studies and advertising scholars, providing a detailed historical analysis supplemented by rigorous research and a variety of theoretical perspectives. Groskopf's work not only fills a significant gap in historical knowledge but also offers a platform for further discussions about the influence of media on consumer behaviour and the ethical dimensions of advertising.

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Suggested Citation

Curry, Jarvis. “*Profit Margins: The American Silent Cinema and the Marginalization of Advertising*, by Jeremy Groskopf.” *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 27, 2024, pp. 251–254. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.27.21

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