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Commercial Break: British Advertising on Screen

Steven Foxon

Abstract: *In this report, I describe the development of British screen advertising as represented in the BFI National Archive, address several key questions about the BFI's advertising holdings, discuss the BFI's strategic digitisation projects, Unlocking Film Heritage and Heritage 2022, and, finally, share areas of research and topics within advertising that are ripe for exploration as possible academic partnerships.*

When I was appointed to the post of Advertising Films Curator at the British Film Institute (BFI) in 2013, I felt a great sense of responsibility, being aware of the sheer scale of the existing collection, one of the world's largest, but also excited about its potential. I fully subscribed to the lure of the "archive as a repository where documents lay dormant, waiting to be roused" (Amad 159). The relationship between film historiography and film archives, and their "potential for history making" in particular (Jones 119), have fascinated me ever since. The collection, now thought to be around 100,000 adverts across multiple film, video and digital formats, not only represents a history of great British filmmaking for the purposes of promotion but also documents the history of many current and long forgotten UK brands. Equally, the collection encapsulates the story of UK marketing and maps the history of consumerism in British society, almost from the birth of moving images.

In this report, I will describe the development of British screen advertising as represented in the BFI National Archive, address several key questions about the BFI's advertising holdings, discuss the BFI's strategic digitisation projects, Unlocking Film Heritage and Heritage 2022, and, finally, share areas of research and topics within advertising that are ripe for exploration as possible academic partnerships. Many of the archival clips cited here can be watched for free online at the BFI Player.

I. Development of British Screen Advertising within the BFI National Archive

The BFI National Archive advertising collection can be viewed as falling into three distinct areas of broadcast history: Precinema Advertising; Cinema Advertising and Television Advertising, as outlined below.

Precinema Advertising

The potential of the moving image as an advertising tool was recognised from the earliest days of cinema. The oldest acknowledged film advert still in existence is "Dewar's Scotch Whisky" (1897), produced by the International Film Company—a short-lived venture

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formed by two ex-Edison employees (McKernan). In his first volume on the history of early American cinema, Charles Musser cites evidence that such films were projected onto improvised screens hung over busy crossroads in major cities. Magic lanterns almost certainly would have been used for this purpose previously, and the emerging moving image technology would have seemed a natural next step to enterprising showmen (Musser, 169–70).

Other candidates for the oldest surviving British advert in the BFI National Archive include an advert for Vinolia Soap (c.1898). A development of the earlier US Dewar's scotch whisky advert, "The Spirit of His Forefathers" (c.1900) sees Scottish figures climb down from their portrait paintings on the wall to sample Dewar's scotch whisky, whilst the film for Rudge-Whitworth "Britain's Best Bicycle" (1902), originally filmed in 68mm, shows a woman demonstrating the superior qualities of a Rudge-Whitworth bicycle to a male cyclist. All the dates for these films are estimated based on analysis of the film stock and any available contextual information; as a group they represent the oldest advertising films in the archive. Elaine Burrows opts for "Vinolia Soap" as the earliest, dating it from "about 1897", and it certainly seems the likeliest contender (53). But of particular note is the technique used in "The Spirit of His Forefathers". There is a clear development between Dewar's earlier 1897 US film and this one, which was based on a Dewar's print advertising campaign: the concept is now delivered to the viewer with greater clarity; there is a distinct beginning and end to the "narrative" which the earlier film lacks, and better exposure is given to the brand name.

These films are grouped by the fact that they are "precinema", produced before the establishment of purpose-built cinemas, raising the obvious question of where they were shown. It would seem likely from the earliest film programmes of music halls, travelling fairs and local showmen that adverts were shown on screen, but often in a primitive form with text and pictures painted onto magic lantern slides (Lane 18). Other documented uses of advertising films are as a kind of animated billboard, as described with "Dewar's Scotch Whisky", or as sales gimmicks at exhibitions as was the case with Rudge-Whitworth's "Britain's Best Bicycle", which is thought to have been shown at an exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1902. Many short advertising films were made during the pre-First World War period, but an actual screen advertising industry with networks of production and distribution did not make itself apparent until after the First World War.

Cinema Advertising

The postwar development of new larger picture palaces in British cities seems to have been the real launching pad to the establishment of an advertising film industry. This new financial investment and confidence in cinema, and the increasing size of audiences, was a natural attraction to advertisers. Evidence of this can be found in the appearance of some key brand names as advertising sponsors. Cadbury's "Elsie and the Brown Bunny" (c.1921), with its references to "Alice in Wonderland", and Lever Brothers' "Barbara's Secret" (c.1923) advertising Lifebuoy Soap are two examples of adverts by sponsors who quickly rose to the forefront of this growing medium.

It is important to note that these were produced alongside what can be viewed as sponsored documentary films, such as Unilever's "A Romance of Industry" (c.1924) about the coconut palm kernel industry of the Solomon Islands, which fulfilled a different function and were perhaps aimed at a different audience. Elaine Burrows suggests that industrial promotional films were less popular with working class audiences who had little interest in

seeing reminders of their everyday working lives, preferring entertainment on their evening out (53). A further indication of the growth of the industry can be found in the establishment of advertising production companies such as Commercial Films (operating c.1922–23), Adlets (c. 1923–30) and Publicity Films (c.1926–54), and the move into filmmaking of existing advertising agencies such as London Press Exchange (active from c.1916).

In 1925 an enterprising young man named Harry Adley set up the Younger Publicity Service after identifying a market for films to replace the crude advertising (still mainly a mixture of painted curtains and slides) that was running in most cinemas at the time. He teamed up with an animator and began to produce "Younger's Shopper's Gazette", an early attempt to create a package of adverts, adding moving titles and simple cartoons to liven up the commercials. By 1946 the company provided what they called "advertising budgets" to over a thousand independent and small circuit cinemas in England, Scotland and Wales, providing material from "local, semi-local and national advertisers" (Wallace 5). Of the more famous names, Rank Screen Advertising was not established until 1938, and Pearl & Dean not until 1953; the former was a subsidiary of Odeon Theatres and the latter worked with the ABC circuit and absorbed many of the previously established cinema advertising names.

Cinema screen advertising found its voice after the transition to sync-sound in the early 1930s with the development of expertise in advertising agencies and production companies. Feature-film genres were judged popular with mainstream cinema audiences by the advertising producers: "The Warning" (1941) for Gibbs SR played on film noir conventions with an elaborate mock-trailer for a thriller that never existed featuring knife throwing and gangsters; inspired by the bold and elegant big screen musicals of the period, "Co-operette" (1938) depicted dancing vegetables in a distinctively colourful mini-musical for the Co-op. By the late 1930s many of the elements for the rapid expansion of the advertising industry were in place, although initially stalled by the Second World War when cinemas were closed for the first period of the war and film stocks were rationed. Quickly, however, the cinemas were reopened, and their importance for morale, communication and national unity was realised as brands capitalised on new ways to reach audiences.

The BFI Archive includes a number of the Second World War films made by advertising sponsors in response to these new circumstances. Unilever produced a series of short films similar to the Ministry of Information's "Food Flash" series, which offered hints and tips on making the best use of wartime rations. "Mixing with the Murgatroyds" (1943) shows how to make scrambled eggs from egg powder, before ending with pans and dishes being cleaned with Vim, a Unilever product. "Rinso: Little Miss Muddlehead" (1943) introduces product promotion tinged with wartime patriotism in an outlandish animation. Miss Muddlehead is encouraged, by a talking Rinso washing powder box, to conserve fuel in order to do her bit for the war effort and defeat Hitler. Despite this activity, rationing and consumerism are unnatural bedfellows, and the industry was largely in stasis. With the gradual phasing out of rationing in the early 1950s, the potential for massive expansion within the industry was realised.

Screen advertising was not focussed wholly on national brands and chain stores. The BFI's collection holds a significant number of commercials marketed to local audiences. Regional adverts targeting local goods have been a big hit since the 1920s when local businesses were quick to see the potential of a big screen and a dedicated local audience. While they didn't have access to the budgets of the national brands, regionally specific businesses had the benefit of that personal touch. Products and services evolved over time, but that

scratchy advert for your local restaurant or carpet warehouse, so integral to the cinemagoing experience into the 1990s, had its roots in the booming entrepreneurship of the industry many decades before.

Television Advertising

The beginning of independent commercial television on 22 September 1955, completely funded by its advertising revenue, marks the most significant development in the history of moving image advertising on screen. The circumstances around its foundation and the mixture of public attraction and antipathy have been well documented in a variety of publications such as Briggs. The majority of studies in this field, however, quickly draw comparison with their US produced counterparts rather than looking to address any continuity between UK cinema and television commercials. The difficulty with this common comparison is that in the US, television had always been sponsored, whereas in Britain the BBC had been broadcasting without commercials since 1936. Continuity from British Cinema advertising can be seen through many examples of early television advertising held within the BFI Archive. Pearl & Dean were already at the forefront of cinema advertising at the birth of ITV, with an established studio and production team, they were quick off the mark to produce adverts for the small screen in an attempt to define the format for television advertising too. Documentary film practitioners also saw opportunity in the new medium, with filmmakers such as James Garrett who had been with the British Transport Films documentary unit rising to become British advertising giants.

Further study of the establishing years of UK television advertising and analysis of their public perception would be a viable research field and one greatly served by the holdings of the BFI National Archive. Previous comprehensive studies into the subject include Jo Gable's *Tupenny Punch and Judy Show* (1980) and Brian Henry's *Television Advertising: The First 30 Years* (1985), making it thirty-eight years since the last significant analysis of the subject. Gable's book draws on material held at the BFI and is therefore correlated to available BFI holdings at the time of the book's research. There have been a number of television programmes addressing the subject, such as the BBC series "Washes Whiter", broadcast in five parts in 1990. More recent television analysis of advertising has been from the "nostalgia-fest" genre, with Channel 4's *100 Greatest Television Adverts* presented by Graham Norton; though their intended purpose falls under popular light entertainment, they are very well researched.

Further research on the birth of the television commercial is a noteworthy area of interest for the BFI Archives. September 2015 marked the sixtieth anniversary of ITV, and a series of screenings branded "ITV60" took place at the BFI Southbank. To feed into the wider ITV60 celebrations and to mark the development of the British television commercial, the curatorial team (nonfiction and television departments) embarked upon a project to try and locate as many of the twenty-five opening night ITV adverts as possible. We have at present located eight commercials from the first night of transmission. Previously only two adverts were thought to exist from this landmark event. There is a great deal of ITV material in the collection from which further commercials might be identified. Future research could help to understand what a typical TV night might have looked like in the late 1950s.

There are several other early television collections of note for future possible research programmes. The Daz Detergent "Doorstep" series (c.1958–2003) is one of the longest and most successful running television commercial series ever, which featured real people at home;

the BFI holds nearly a complete run of the commercials produced on film and, in many cases, titled with the name of each member of the public featured. A popular staple of commercial television in the early years was the shortlived but fondly remembered Admag magazine format, which combined guest appearances and product promotion with practical household advice often in the form of a soap opera. The BFI holds "Ideal Home" (1961), the only known surviving episode of the classic Admag "Jim's Inn" (which ran for 300 episodes). Admags were eventually banned after a report by the Pilkington Committee published in June 1962 stated that they blurred the distinction between programmes and adverts (1962). The BFI Commercial Break collection includes twenty-eight commercials for the prolific Egg Marketing Board, many featuring well-known celebrities of the era such as Tony Hancock ("Professional Jealousy", 1966), Beryl Reid ("Bargain", 1966), George Best ("Footballer" 1970). The "Sheila" series of commercials (1964) for the Egg Marketing Board was directed by theatre legend Joan Littlewood, produced by Anthony Shaffer ("The Wicker Man",1973) and shot by a young Nicolas Roeg.

The huge number of commercials reflecting British social history and targeting the "housewife" are worthy of further research. Much of the advertising of the last century is inescapably aimed directly at women in the home. Selling anything from frozen peas to washing powders and luxury soap, advertisers have promised to make women's lives easier and to help them build happy homes and successful relationships. Women have all-too-often been patronised and objectified by a male dominated advertising industry, but screen advertising also tells (and sells) a more positive story of social progress for women, with increasing social and economic independence. The BFI collection tracks the ups and downs of female empowerment in the twentieth century, with its false steps as revealing as its forward ones. "Bournvita: Other Women's Lives" (1952–54), these mini-documentary portraits of real British working women, using their real names (and addresses!), made for Cadbury's saw busy mothers and wives juggling long busy days of labour with intimate home lives, capped off with a therapeutic cuppa before bed. This collection is distinctive because it has received less attention than the "Oxo Family—Life with Katie" or Persil "Slice of Life" commercials explored by Nixon (2016). The collection also includes spots targeted at financially independent women, such as the "Pex: No-Run Nylons" (1965), where Leicester-based firm Pex's "No-Run" nylons, were "the innovation for the smart working girl on the go".

Building the National Collection

Advertising films have been accessioned into the BFI since the early beginnings of the archive in 1935, but originally only in a very limited fashion and in an indirect manner. "On Parade" (1936), acquired on 12 October 1938, is a typical example. This animated advertisement for Horlicks was not acquired as a representation of the advertising industry's output but for the artistry of its creator George Pal. On acquisition, it was described on the acquisition card index as a "puppet short" because, it seems, advertising film was not a recognised genre description. The recognition of advertising material as a category worthy of preservation as such seems to have begun in the 1960s, at around the same time as the first appointment of a Television Officer in the NFTVA in 1959 and a Television Selection Committee in 1962.[1] The acquisition of adverts from that period onwards seems to have been split between the Television and Documentary acquisition sections.

The bulk of the advertising material held in the archive was brought in during the 1980s, with large collections acquired from Unilever and agencies such as J. Walter Thompson, Lintas

and others. A renewed interest in advertising is evident from a number of special archive screenings of early cinema advertising held at the then National Film Theatre (now BFI Southbank). The decline in the number of film laboratories around London during the 1980s and 90s prompted a further increase of material being offered to the archive as closures prompted the clearing out of stores. This, combined with the construction of the Conservation Centre in Berkhamsted and its increased film storage vault capacity, meant that the archive found itself in a position to take on a significant amount of advertising film. A similar growth in the early 2000s as the archive developed its state-of-the-art temperature-controlled Master Film Storage vaults in Warwickshire has seen history repeat itself as the collections grows alongside archive capacity.

Until the mid-1980s the vast majority of advertising films that were offered to the BFI were in the form of 16mm and 35mm positive film prints. Donations would come largely from individual sources, collectors, former agency employees and from sponsors or brands via direct request from the selection committee; occasionally, early format video would be offered when the master material for the production was produced on video. Rarely, until the mass clearing of agency vaults and film laboratories during the 1980s as the video age took hold, would the BFI be offered master film negatives. When off-air recording of broadcast television by the BFI Archive began, on 1 January 1985, adverts were captured sporadically in the programme recordings. From 1989 adverts were captured in all off-air recordings. Unfortunately, however, the adverts contained in these recordings have never been catalogued, and it is difficult to gauge the size of this collection. Still, it is not unrealistic to claim that the process has captured virtually every new terrestrial peak time advert since 1989 on broadcast quality videotape at least once. Where sampling of television programmes is less representative, such as children's television slots and late-night programming for example, then the products aimed at those audiences will be correspondingly less represented—children's toys being an example of the former.

Getting to Grips with the Collection

Prior to my appointment as Curator of Advertising Films in 2013, the BFI advertising holdings totalled thirty-thousand adverts; today this figure is currently estimated to be about 100,000. Some of our collections (such as Guinness, Bass and John Player) have been documented to a higher standard than others. Others (such as the W.D. & H.O. Wills collection containing the Strand cigarettes "Lonely Man" series) have recently been accessioned by the archive team for processing.

The collection includes a number of high-profile brand acquisitions. In 2003 the BFI partnered with the Coca-Cola Archives Department in Atlanta in a fully funded project to acquire, preserve and make accessible their entire run of existing UK produced or adapted commercials from 1956 onwards. As a result of a provision to include associated non-Coca-Cola work relevant to the BFI's existing collection, we were able to produce video viewing copies for over 125 previously unviewable commercials for other brands, including a commercial showreel from Sir Alan Parker. The project funding model saw Coca-Cola pay for every aspect of the work, including the staff. We also hold a significant amount of Unilever film material, particularly from Lever Brothers, dating back to 1910. Key British brands under the Unilever umbrella include Bovril, Colman's Mustard, Marmite, Persil, PG Tips, Walls and Bird's Eye. Guinness is another high-profile brand that is well represented with a

comprehensive collection that spans from the birth of ITV, when "Sea Lion", the first Guinness advert on television, was aired in 1955, until the mid-1980s.

The collection includes acquisitions from other sources, such as a substantial 35mm collection from advertising agency J. Walter Thompson (JWT), and a collection of approximately two-hundred U-Matic videotape copies of late 1980s TV commercials from the Advertising Producers' Association (APA), complete with cataloguing information detailing the client, agency and often director for each advertisement. Although undocumented, the Archive holds a very substantial off-air recordings collection: virtually all ads shown during primetime on ITV (London) and C4 since 1989, and C5 since it began in 1997, on master format, as well as a vast number of ads shown at other times of day up to the present day. The collection is uniquely accessible for researchers looking for advertising in general from a particular period but is extremely problematic when seeking a particular advertisement. If the collection was made searchable, it could be of considerable importance to researchers and the industry. The size of such a cataloguing task, however, is formidable. A significant single donation of films in the BFI Archive is the ITCA Advertising Collection, which represents approximately 18,000 adverts and over seven-thousand brands, spanning the history of British television advertising. This collection arrived at the BFI Master Film Store during 2015.

Perhaps the most significant acquisition of the last decade has been the former advertising holdings of the National Science and Media Museum in Bradford. Following a review of the museum's collections policy, the BFI has now taken over their advertising collection, which offers significant gains as regards boosting the collection and providing opportunities for further research and development. It includes, in addition to the ITCA collection mentioned above, approximately four-thousand TV commercials produced by James Garrett and Partners from 1963 to 1980; and approximately two-thousand commercials created by advertising agency Leo Burnett between 1966 and 1989 for clients including Green Giant, Proctor & Gamble, Heinz and Kraft. The National Science and Media Museum acquisition also includes the collection of advertising agency Collett Dickenson Pearce (CDP). The CDP holding represents 4,300 items on 35mm, 16mm and VT produced between 1960 and 2000.

CDP played a crucial, formative role in the feature film careers of Alan Parker and David Puttnam, and this collection highlights an ongoing research interest for the BFI in commercials made by significant British film directors, of which the BFI holds several examples: "New Delivery" (1985) directed by Tony Scott for Saab which is said to have put him in the frame to direct *Top Gun* (1986); "Taxi" (1964) directed by Lindsay Anderson for Black Magic; "Good Morning Trevor" (1970) directed by Karel Reisz for Kellogg's, "Silvikrin Shampoo" (1964) directed by Joseph Losey for Silvikrin, "Hop Farm" (1974) directed by Nicolas Roeg for Guinness, and "Fable of the Fabrics" (1942) directed by Alexander Mackendrick for Persil's "Whiter than White(wash)" campaign.

Other collections the BFI has received since my appointment include a 35mm Pearl & Dean collection. Upon cessation of their 35mm distribution operation in December 2013, Pearl & Dean donated a large quantity of advertising films to the BFI National Archive spanning over 100 years of advertising history (containing examples of early cinema advertising and a complete copy of the very last roll of 35mm adverts distributed by Pearl & Dean before the digital distribution switch in 2014), a significant collection of GE Lighting animated television advertisements from 1955 onwards promoting Mazda lightbulbs and Mazda Netabulbs, and a Glaxo Smith Kline collection including ads for Ribena, Lucozade, Beechams, Horlicks, Aquafresh and Macleans.

II. Digitisation and Access

The advertising holdings of the BFI have huge potential. Access to the collection has, in the past, been limited by the fragile nature of many archive master elements trapped in their analogue formats. This remains the case for much of the entire collection. A key change in the last decade, however, has been the shift within archives to a digital culture (Cherchi Usai). The digitisation of archive film offers great potential to provide access on an unprecedented scale as new platforms have emerged to facilitate such access. From a preservation perspective, digital copies are not subject to the same wear and tear risks that have restricted the use of analogue film elements previously (Wengström 125). Whilst the key strengths of digitisation facilitate good access outcomes, they also protect the master elements from over-handling. It should be noted that film elements are still regarded as the best medium for Master-status preservation.

In 2012, the BFI embarked upon an ambitious programme (fully funded by the National Lottery) to digitise archive film footage across all filmmaking genres in a bid to make available Britain's moving image history. Titled Unlocking Film Heritage, it was one of the biggest film digitisation projects ever undertaken, encompassing the BFI National Archive together with national and regional audiovisual archival institutions across the UK. Between 2013–17 around ten thousand titles capturing 120 years of Great Britain on film were digitised and made free to access in a variety of ways.

In March 2017 the BFI Unlocking Film Heritage project curated "Commercial Break", a collection of approximately three hundred commercials spanning the history of the genre and made them available to view on the BFI Player web platform. The collection spanned from "Vinolia Soap" to the late 1980s tracing the overarching themes, landmark titles and development of the advertising film. Intended for general audience viewing, the collection was curated for maximum viewer interest and featured individual film contextualisation for those who want to learn more and dig deeper.

The contextualisation for BFI Player entries aims to share curatorial knowledge and enhance the reader's understanding of the film—often, the detail in these descriptions is unique information that isn't available academically. It is presented in an accessible style that is more journalistic than academic. However, it is important to note that work aimed at the public (our funders) can have academic significance, which might be missed by academics because the work, although open to everyone, is not primarily of an academic nature. An example of the contextualisation for "The Spirit of His Forefathers" reads as follows:

> There's some dram-antic stuff in this 30-second commercial from the dawn of cinema history. Dewar's had used the idea of a laird's ancestors being lured down from their painted portraits to share a whisky in a variety of advertising media before moving image came along. This version is the second surviving example on film, with an earlier American production of the same concept made by the International Film Company in 1897. This British production made a late reappearance as part of a 1977 television commercial for Dewar's under the title "The Whisky of His Ancestors" to promote their advertising heritage.

The "Commercial Break" collection is divided into several sections, each showing the development of the medium with recommended highlights. In a collection of over 100,000 commercials, three hundred may not seem like a lot, but you have to start somewhere and,

balanced against the many other fields of filmmaking preserved in the National Collection, this curated collection represents a strong start to a filmmaking genre that deserves to greater foregrounding. History has rarely offered the opportunity to compile a programme of commercials on this scale; it simply couldn't have happened as a live screening event.

One of Britain's most iconic commercials "The Boy on the Bike" (1973), directed by Ridley Scott for Hovis, was voted in 2019 as one of the nations "most loved" adverts of all time and it also became a landmark title within the UFH project (Stewart). I had been aware even before the project's inception that "The Boy on the Bike" only existed in poor quality on low-grade formats. The BFI had never been offered a copy, and it appeared to have slipped the attention of previous archive selection committees. Its continued existence was perpetuated by dozens of uploads on YouTube from VHS home recordings and, even when used in the Graham Norton "Best Commercials" series, was sourced from a very poor video copy. Even Sir Ridley Scott did not own a decent film element for this commercial and had previously been in touch with the archive to ask us to keep an eye out for it. Then, in the early days of the project, a 35mm film element surfaced on a compilation reel donated to the BFI. An excited call to RSA revealed that, aside from our discovery, they had recently discovered a 35mm element also. An arrangement was made to bring both copies together and make the best possible preservation material we could. The project took on an even greater meaning as Hovis learned of the work we were carrying out and actually teamed up to re-release a slightly tweaked version of the advert for airing throughout 2019. Today's advertising standards are much stricter than they were back in 1973, and some aspects of the original don't sit well with current ad regulations. The original had a claim of wheatgerm in the product ingredients; current food labelling regulations deem that there is not enough wheatgerm in Hovis to allow the ingredient to be mentioned in advertising. There was also a tongue-in-cheek inference in the original advert that should the rider eat the bread, then he would be able to cycle up the hill without struggling—that may be seen as implying performance enhancement today, which wouldn't be allowed either. The greatest hurdle of all to get over in relation to the standards approval was, of course, the simple fact that the boy in the advert is not wearing a cycle helmet, which would be a requirement for any new commercial featuring a child on a bike. Thankfully, it was accepted that the Hovis commercial was a gently modernised re-release rather than a new production! The BFI-remastered original made a triumphant return to small screens in 2019, forty-six years after its original launch and ran until Christmas that year.

III. Public Access: The Challenges

There are some challenges in enabling public access to the advertising collections. Most brands retain rights ownership of the work, and the BFI has to secure rights clearance for purposes other than education and/or research before the commercials can be included on the Player or used in another public engagement work. Obtaining rights clearance can be complicated. Extensive research to trace brand owners is also often required. Many companies have changed owners and in the process of company takeovers and office moves, corporate history is often disposed of along the way. As a result, "corporate memory" is lost: many brands simply do not know their back catalogue of commercial advertising campaigns. For example, "Figaro" for FIAT Strada (1979), directed by Hugh Hudson, is one of the iconic adverts of the 1980s. When we contacted FIAT to clear the rights, we discovered that they had no corporate record of the advert ever existing. Corporate memory is frequently not very long at all. In cases where the brand is defunct, with no known successor or continued rightsholder, the film will

be categorised an “orphan” work, a film without any rights owner; we have a specialist rights team within the BFI to ensure we follow the correct procedure to make use of such material.

Brands have generally welcomed our interest in their corporate heritage but it hasn’t always been plain sailing. Understandably many brands have needed reassurance before lending their identity to our work. Some brands trade on their longstanding heritage (Hovis and Coca-Cola for example) and have been especially proud to be associated with the work of the BFI. Other brands are cautious and concerned about how they might appear or be perceived in today’s world. It is understandable that a view from the 1960s, with belching chimneys across its horizon, for example, may be perceived in today’s climate-aware society in a very different way to how the original advert was intended. Brand owners have to be careful that something that is a nostalgic journey for a BFI audience is not perceived as damaging to the current brand today.

Tobacco and alcohol promotion and depiction further complicate the situation. Many older advertisements do not adhere to the rules and regulations governing moving image advertising for tobacco and alcohol today. The BFI does not permit tobacco promotion on the BFI Player Commercial Break because although the context is archival, tobacco promotion is illegal, and the free player is not controlled behind age-related restrictions.

As a result, several brands did not participate in the “Commercial Break” project and many commercials, for either rights or technical reasons, were not included. The project funding criteria also led to a number of exclusions. A core criterion of Unlocking Film Heritage was that the content had to have originated in a film format (i.e. not video) and was not commercially or freely accessible in a restored state elsewhere. This has a bearing on historiographical significance—what is available for wider audiences and academic study is influenced by very practical factors in archival practice.

The Future

The subject area of British Screen Advertising is so wide that the scope and potential for new research are both exciting and immense. The subject is ripe for deeper study and potential academic partnership.

Recently the BFI has been working on a preservation programme called Heritage 2022 which replaced the Unlocking Film Heritage project that had ended in 2017. The aim was to digitise a significant quantity of the vast numbers of video tapes in the collection. There are many more hours of video tape in the UK than there are video machine “head hours” required to play them. The BFI is committed to a concerted effort to migrate large numbers of obsolete video tape formats to a digital platform for long term preservation. Heritage 2022 will build on the original curated advertising collection further. Given that the advertising industry was a key technology driver in its use of modern media and one of the first areas of filmmaking to adopt video technology, its output will feature significantly in the new digitisation project and unlock commercials from the early 1980s onwards.

This report has touched on a number of significant works which engage with British cultural heritage beyond moving image and examples of areas that are waiting to be explored further and are considered worthy of further research. If you have thoughts or ideas for potential commercial or academic research partnerships with the BFI National Archive about these or

other topics, we would be delighted to hear from you. You can email me directly at steven.foxon@bfi.org.uk.

Notes

[1] Known today as the BFI National Archive (sometimes BFI Archive) the NFTVA was the late 1950s rebranding of the National Film Archive, now incorporating Television – National Film and Television Archive.

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