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Music Video and Commercials Production in the UK Screen Industries: An Overlooked Dynamo of Innovation and Success

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Abstract: *This report evaluates the significance of the AHRC-funded "Fifty Years of British Music Video" research project and its written and digital outputs on existing knowledge of the UK screen industries. It notes that heretofore music video, like advertising, has been a neglected domain of research commissioned by the British Film Institute and of work archived by the BFI's National Film Archive. It has also been overlooked in reports commissioned by the Government into the UK's creative industries. Yet the project's research findings, taken in collaboration with other past and present research on British film and television, suggest that the sector has played a crucial role in talent development and innovation. The report urges the need for further research in this area.*

In 2015, the British Film Institute (BFI) partnered with the British Library and a number of universities to produce the first consistent and comprehensive study of the impact, influence and industry of the British music video sector from 1966 to 2016.[1] This research was seen as necessary for the BFI, both to develop its collecting policy in the BFI National Archive and more broadly to understand the role music videos have played in the British screen sector. There were examples of music videos in the archive, many within programmes held in its Television Archive which had been collected systematically from the 1980s, but there was no active collections policy for them. This neglect was paralleled in the BFI's approach to the commercials sector. Though the BFI had acquired the entire archive of advertisements shown on ITV from its inception, there has been no attempt to expand the limited scholarship on this successful industry.

Evidence from the "Fifty Years of British Music Video" research project showed that music video is an important sector in the UK creative economy and has acted as a significant contributor to the UK's GDP employing significant numbers of the creative workforce. The research also revealed that the music video industry developed in the 1960s in the Soho area of London (Caston), and was initially embedded within the production structure and workflow for television commercials that had emerged after the launch of commercial television in Britain in 1955 and would become consolidated as a significant and distinctive production sector in the decade between 1968 and 1978. Between the late 1970s and early 1980s a number of companies which specialised in music video production were launched such as Limelight, Oil Factory and MGMM and these would become the leading players of the decade, setting up satellite offices in New York (where MTV was headquartered) and Los Angeles. Many also established separate divisions for the production of commercials and feature films. As Emily Caston has shown, it was through this process that Eric Fellner and Tim Bevan, later two key

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figures at Working Title, began their film-producing careers heading film divisions within music video production companies in Soho.

The lack of knowledge and understanding of the role of the music video sector in the UK screen industries is replicated for the commercials sector. In commissioned reports on the UK screen industries, music video and commercials production have very rarely been mentioned and information on them has been a continuing gap. The advertising industry is the largest sector in the UK creative economy and is both a significant contributor to the UK's GDP and employs significant numbers of the creative workforce. In the UK's first *Creative Industries Mapping Document*, published in 1998, the workforce in the advertising industry was estimated at 96,000. The document noted how "advertising […] seems to be a seed-bed for creative talents", citing the examples of Salman Rushdie and Fay Weldon who both began their careers as copywriters, and Alan Parker, Ridley Scott and Hugh Hudson who began their working lives in advertising before becoming internationally acclaimed film directors (15). The commercials industry was mainly London-based and offered services across all media. In 1998, of the 210 companies, forty-seven were independently owned and medium-sized but were under competitive pressure from the twenty large agencies which had increasingly become part of international conglomerates. This structural change in the industry can be seen as the model for the consolidation of the UK television production sector after 2003 (Paterson).

The economic value of both the music video and commercials production sectors are staggering. In 1985 Dave Laing cited research indicating that the total annual outlay on music video production in the UK came to £12 million. He estimated this was spent on eight hundred or so short productions (78). In a report in *Promo News* in 2000 Caston, working with the video commissioners for EMI Records, East West Records and Universal, established that, in 1998, UK labels spent approximately £37.5 million on 850 music videos, a significant increase on the 1985 figure (Caston et al. 11). The data was based on surveys and questionnaires with record label managers and video commissioners at British independents, semi-independents and the British divisions of major international companies. During what became known as a "Golden Era", it is estimated that the industry produced between one thousand and two thousand videos a year, with only a fraction (around seventy per month) making it into the trade publication *Promo News*. The level of production fell in the digital era, as the industry adjusted to a new economic model based on internet distribution (Edmond).

The evidential base for the way commercials production has merged remains more patchy. Research carried out by the *British Film Institute Television Industry Tracking Study* reports in the 1990s, investigating the career paths of creative workers in television, showed some interdependence of the advertising and television sectors.[2] Commercials and corporate videos provided work for a number of independent production companies seeking to build sustainable businesses while also securing employment for the ever-growing freelance sector in the UK's screen industries. In 1995, 28% of freelancers in the panel had had experience in commercials production, 35% in corporate videos and 16% in music video (BFI, *First* 23), while in November 1997 6% of freelancer and 8% of independent owners had worked in commercials in the previous six months (with an additional 14% of freelancers, and 26% of company owners working in corporate video) (BFI, *Second* 22). There were numerous examples of companies in the BFI study which had diversified by seeking commissions from corporate clients, and by the end of the research in 1998 working on commercials was a source of income for 9% of the panel and corporate video for 25.6% (BFI, *Third* 24).

The recognition of the importance of the advertising industry as a key source of creative workers, recognised in the *Creative Industries Mapping Document*, is paralleled in the music video sector. The research shows that in the 1980s and 90s there was an emerging interdependency between commercials and music video production and the wider screen production sector with companies such as Palace Pictures and Kudos setting up music video divisions to recruit new talent. From the late 1970s to the present day, the music video production sector has been horizontally integrated with the broader film and television industries. Acclaimed British cinematographers Seamus McGarvey, John Mathieson and Dan Ladin began their careers in music video. The film directors who began their careers in music video include Jonathan Glazer, Steve Barron, Jamie Thraves, David Slade, Dawn Shadforth and Garth Jennings. Many such as Thraves and Shadforth have continued to direct videos whilst working in drama. As Caston has pointed out, music video is one of the hidden screen industries (alongside commercials and corporate video), previously neglected in research on Britain's screen industries.

The dynamics of the market for screen materials in the past forty years, and in particular the rapid development of independent production suppliers in broadcasting reliant on a growing freelance labour force, has meant that firms often relied on corporate work to sustain their businesses. The UK has a long history of producing industrial film with important work by Patrick Russell and other curators at the BFI exploring its different facets (Russell and Taylor). Although the traditional route into broadcasting in the 1960s and 70s had been through securing employment at the BBC or the ITV franchise holders then progressing through the organisation, many had joined the screen industries through working on commercials or corporate work then using that experience, having gained the union card necessary to apply for jobs in broadcasting or filmmaking.

Examples from the BFI's *Television Industry Tracking Study* included a male in his forties who had begun working as an assistant film editor in commercials in the 1970s, joined the BBC in 1973 as an assistant floor manager in BBC Norwich, and was then promoted first to become an assistant film editor then to the director/producer role, before setting up his own company in 1994. He wrote, "It's about getting a reputation to allow some freedom and bargaining power". For a female respondent in her fifties, the corporate video world became a means to ensure financial health when the precarities of freelance life emerged for those who had quit full time employment at a broadcaster for the promised land of independent production. For others, it was a case of having parallel work tracks. For example, a man in his thirties wrote in 1998 about setting up "to break into a parallel career in commercials to supplement the initial stages of this development work (on features)". This connection and continuity between sectors has occasionally been reflected in adverts and features in *Campaign*, the trade journal of the advertising industry (e.g. Barkin; Campbell).

The roles of the music video and commercials sector as a nursery slope for creative talent and to offer work to firms and individuals has continued in the digital era, albeit largely unrecognised by major cultural organisations, like the BFI. Recent but as yet unpublished research from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded "Television Production in Transition: Independence, Scale and Sustainability" research project at the University of Glasgow (2017–2020) shows that companies with diversified portfolios of work have subsequently benefited from the consolidation of the industry. One example of a successful company producing commercials and music videos is Pulse Films which was acquired in 2016 by Vice Media, an American-based Canadian digital media company founded in 1994 that had initially concentrated on youth- and young-adult-focused digital media, before

selectively investing in upstream companies from 2004 and acquiring Pulse. In interviews carried out for the "Television Production in Transition" project, it emerged that the rationale for this acquisition was in part because of Pulse's production portfolio making factual entertainment and films, but also with a track record in producing music videos and commercials. This aligned with the Vice business model, which incorporates agencies and digital content as well as television and studios with a long-term plan to work with talent and move into more lucrative areas like high-end television. The benefits from integration was mutually beneficial, with Pulse being able to use the information advantages from Vice's connection to big brands for its production of commercials.

In summary, the relationships and interdependencies between different sectors in the creative industry are insufficiently understood. This is arguably to the detriment of the overall UK creative industries when support measures or regulatory interventions are debated. These interdependencies have had little recognition in the recent Government Industrial Strategy document on the creative industries written by Sir Peter Bazalgette, who saw both the advertising and design industries as relying on creative disciplines and potentially providing deep connections in creative clusters serving regional communities. This report led to the funding of the AHRC's Creative Clusters research programme funded from Government's Industrial Strategy funding.

There is a need to address some of the consequences of the policy deficits faced by this hidden sector across its supply chain as well as systematically to investigate the career paths which have been taken by people who have started their career in these sectors and then moved into other parts of the UK's globally successful creative industries. The adage about learning from the past can ill afford to be ignored at this time of global change where the UK's competitive advantage in the demonstrably linked creative industries needs to be sustained, not least by providing environments for talent development and innovation.

Furthermore, the legitimacy of screen production in both the music video and commercials sector to be considered part of the creative industries has several manifestations. There has been a lack of recognition of these sectors as a crucial wellspring of talent by Screen Skills, the screen industry sector training body. Skillset, its predecessor, did recognise its importance in its Employment Census where the numbers employed were enumerated (*A Snapshot in Time*), and by having both the Advertising Film and Videotape Producers' Association (AFVPA) and the International Visual Communications Association (IVCA) in its management structure. But these sectors have also suffered from the BFI's narrow interpretation of the industry responsibilities inherited from the UK Film Council in 2011, and its obsession with Hollywood investment, most obviously with the signally inappropriate appointment as Chairman of a senior Hollywood studio executive (Josh Berger from Warner Brothers). Paradoxically, however, the BFI National Archive, which is tasked with securing the nation's cultural heritage through the moving image, holds the entire collection of advertisements screened on ITV from its inception in 1955, as well as the most important industrial/corporate commissions in the sector.

The music video research project was an important example of collaborative work between the academy and a national cultural institution to reclaim and validate the contribution of a hitherto ignored sector. The project addressed the neglect of that sector, but still more research is needed on other sectors of screen production for which data is missing in order to gain an accurate picture of a major part of the much-vaunted British creative industries and inform future policy directions.

Notes

1 The universities involved in the project were: University of Portsmouth, University of the Arts London, University of West London.

2 *The British Film Institute Television Industry Tracking Study* used a prompted diary format every four months between 1994 and 1998 after an initial questionnaire to track the background, careers and views of 450 creative workers drawn from a variety of roles and employment statuses in the television industry. The basic data was reported in a series of reports published in 1995, 1997 and 1999, and formed the basis of a number of papers, including Dex et al.

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