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Hidden Screen Industries: The 'Known Unknown' in Screen History

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This is an introduction to the Hidden Screen Industries special dossier.

The UK doesn't have a screen industry. It has many screen industries. Beyond the familiar worlds of feature film and broadcast television sit many more sectors – the sectors that produce music video, screen advertising, fashion film, branded content, industrial film, corporate video, adult film, medical and education film to name but a few. These sectors are as creative artistically and as productive economically as those that produce more mainstream media. Yet, compared to those, they are hidden screen industries. They may produce thousands of moving image works every year, playing every possible role in the personal, professional and cultural lives of viewers in Britain and abroad, but those who produce them are rarely if ever factored into either public policy for, or cultural appreciation of, Britain's creative industries. Many of these forms of moving image content are deeply rooted in the earliest filmmaking produced from the late nineteenth century onwards. The rich output of generations of brilliant filmmakers working across the twentieth century in such fields as cinema and television advertising, industrial documentary and public information film constitute a vast proportion of the moving image archives' holdings of the British Film Institute National Archive.

In 2021, an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) grant was awarded to run a research network for those interested in these hidden sectors (AH/V015656/1). The funded network ran from 2021 to 2023 led by Principal Investigator Professor Emily Caston at the University of West London and Co-Investigator Patrick Russell at the British Film Institute. The goal was to unite the policymakers with the archivists: to assist policymakers in thinking of themselves as history-makers in action, and to think of archivists as policy-advisers. The network sought to bring together contemporary creative practitioners (and their trade bodies) with academics and policymakers, historians and archivists to debate and dissect key questions about future research agendas, archival preservation and public engagement. Uniting historical research with policymaking and industry practice is no easy goal. As Melanie Bell reports of a cancellation of an industry event in her oral history of women's hidden labour, 'One stakeholder representative explained the cancellation on the grounds that 'the research, as it is historical, is not of great interest to the industry at present' (Bell, 2018: 23). It was the fact that the industry organisers did not recognise that understanding the past, understanding systemic discrimination against women in the history of film and television, might help industry to understand not only the present but how to formulate solutions to prevent the problems raised by the #MeToo movement in the future.

This collection of articles is the output of the AHRC Hidden Screen Industries Network. The first piece on the screen advertising industry looks at the role of oral history in screen research. What is 'screen advertising'? What is its history? The

history of advertising on screen is not a simple history of capitalist sales and marketing to increase profits for businesses: much of screen advertising focused on political communications and charitable communications. The advertising agencies of the 1980s played a very considerable role in determining not only the political character of British Governments (both Labour and Conservative), but in determining the effectiveness of their policies to alter human behaviour. *The Guardian* 'Points of View' (1986) commercial signposts this by revealing the extent to which all of those who used screen narratives to induce changed behaviour did so by the control of perspective. Several recent books describe the advertising supply chain as the *persuasion* industries because of the role agencies played in public health campaigns, charitable work, interest group lobbying, and political party campaigns (Fletcher 2008, McKevitt 2018). The screen advertising production sector was not only in the business of structurally supporting capitalism by selling products through what Marxist discourse would term 'false needs', but many of the production companies (and advertising agencies) were also engaged in the discourse of socially progressive political activity through work with charities which they often subsidised or even funded.

In the next article, Carter presents a nuanced and complex history of the adult film industry. Until 2000, it was a criminal offence to sell hardcore pornography in Britain. Despite this, there was a thriving under-the-counter trade in photographs, books and 8 mm films across Soho's many bookstores and through mail-order. Drawing on his 2023 book, Carter considers the extent to which Britain's illicit trade in hardcore pornography can be understood as a hidden economy. Whilst existing studies of 'hidden economies' have a tendency to focus on off-the-books business (Williams 2006) or unregistered economic activities (Feige 1990), Lackó (2000) notes the complexities of defining a hidden economy, suggesting that it comprises sub-economies including the not only the informal economy (do-it-yourself pursuits) and the underground economy (unregistered economic activity or tax evasion) but also the criminal economy (economic activity which breaks the law). In his article, Carter explores how Britain's trade in pornographic films might be considered this kind of hidden screen economy: drawing on ethnohistorical research, interviews and extensive archival work, Carter argues that this illicit trade was never actually hidden from public consumption and identifies the practices that were involved to preserve and sustain the economy.

Angela Saward's article explores the historical and contemporary significance of medical film in Britain, particularly its role in education and practice for medical professionals. While there is substantial literature on American and European medical films, the British sector has received less attention. Looking at the British Medical Association (BMA) Film Library, its establishment, purpose and film competition which ran 1957–1997, Saward analyses two cohorts of films (fracture treatment from

the 1930s and then anaesthesia from the 1940s) that were part of the collection and still available to medical professionals until the BMA ceased to manage the collection in 2005. She argues that the films form a case study of how film communicated discourses of care. Ethical and practical considerations, she maintains, have hindered the preservation of these films, leaving them hidden, shelved or disposed of. Saward asks what the films can tell us today and whether they had a central role in medical education in Britain.

The binary distinction between 'amateur' and 'professional' filmmaking is a common theme in analyses of hidden industries, and is the focus of Zoe Viney-Burgess's article. Louisa Gauvain (1880–1945) is a key figure in this discussion, whose 1913 work challenges traditional definitions of amateurism. This article argues for a movement beyond the amateur/professional binary to appreciate the diverse contributors to regional film collections, including women and film exhibitors. She argues that Gauvain's medical film *Plaster of Paris* (1913) highlights women's engagement in filmmaking, and expressions of gendered labour, and serves as an analogy for the broader treatment of amateur women filmmakers whose contributions have been largely overlooked in the history of film. Viney-Burgess proposes the term 'non-professional' rather than 'amateur', beginning the reclamation of women's contributions to early cinema. Viney-Burgess' piece calls to the mind Sheila Rowbotham's classic study of women in Britain from the Puritan revolution of the mid-seventeenth century to the 1930s. In that book, Rowbotham showed how class and sex, work and the family, personal life and social pressures shaped and hindered women's struggles for equality and rendered much of their labour *hidden*; Rowbotham identified the intricate relations between paid work and work in the home and their relation to the social valuation of women (Rowbotham 1977).

All the articles in this collection demonstrate that it is impossible to write histories of these hidden screen industries without also writing political and economic analyses of the industries financing and commissioning them. Malcolm Cook's piece raises those issues about the oil industry. Building on his 2018 history of screen animation, Cook examines the use of animation within oil industry films to understand the ways this form of filmmaking both conceals and reveals different aspects of oil extraction and exploitation, including their implications for the present-day climate crisis. His article focuses closely on the animated films made for British Petroleum (BP) by British animation studios during the twentieth century, particularly the 1951 film *We've Come a Long Way* made by the Halas and Batchelor animation studio. As Cook points out, Brian Jacobson has shown how the growth of oil-sponsored cinema in France parallels the

British picture described here (Jacobson 2021); whilst both British and French histories have close connections, their distinctive historical and social contexts require further specialist study.

The next article on the UK's postproduction industry by Caston highlights the value of historical research for policy-making today. For some ten years, the VFX sector has attracted significant attention because of its success as an export industry and inward investment industry. But the UK's post-production industry, from which VFX developed in the 1970s and 1980s, has remained largely a hidden and undocumented sector. The article presents a historical case study analysis of one of the UK's leading VFX and post-production companies, the Moving Picture Company (MPC). Today a multinational award-winning company owned by Technicolor, MPC was founded by Luckwell in 1970 to launch video technologies for the independent production sectors before moving into VFX, CG and animation. The article tackles key themes of technology and innovation, regulation and governance, and market shifts and competition, challenges with which the sector is still grappling today.

Marketa Uhlirova worked closely with the industry in excavating the history of fashion film (2020). Her AHRC-funded research project on the archaeology of fashion film was the first to systematically investigate the hidden history of fashion film in the silent era between 1900 and 1929 as well as its legacy for the rapidly changing field of fashion communications today. Run in collaboration with the BFI and UK Fashion Council, it posited fashion film as a unique hybrid of two industries with distinct practices, resources and motivations. The project's interdisciplinary approach provided a new historical and theoretical framework for understanding this important and increasingly popular phenomenon. Much fashion film is held by corporations, and there are a great many challenges to academics in gaining access.

The final piece in this special dossier is an edited transcription of a roundtable discussion centred on the methodological challenges in data collection on the less visible screen industries. Steve Garvey, one of the participants, is the CEO of research agency Moving Image which collaborates with trade association the Event and Visual Communication Association (EVCOM) to produce annual statistics on the branded film industry. In recent years, the BFI's Research and Statistics unit has been developing a new set of research methods for data collection on sectors and industries. The roundtable discussion collates expert knowledge of the industrial structures, economic drivers, impacts and demographic makeup of these hidden screen industries. The debate exposes this knowledge to critical challenges and public-interest questions ensuring democratic access, accountability and public scrutiny of these sectors. Pooling

these insights and preliminary answers to pressing questions, the roundtable aimed to identify priorities for future research on many of those individual sectors, flag up urgent actions to address diversity standards and regional representation on and off screen, and suggest potential programmes of action for a new network of researchers.

The articles presented here are a fraction of the hugely exciting research being undertaken worldwide on aspects and sectors of the screen industries heretofore less visible in policy-focused research. Much of this work falls under the category of 'useful' film (Acland and Wasson 2011, Orgeron et al 2011, Wasson & Grieveson 2018, Vonderau and Hediger 2009, Vonderau et al 2017). It encompasses calls from colleagues for a more comprehensive global understanding of how the various sectors of screen craft intersect economically and culturally (Grieveson 2017, Craig and Cunningham 2019, Cunningham 2013, McDonald 2022). It is part of a broader expansion of twentieth-century film studies (Grieveson 2009) beyond the subject paradigm imagined by the first generation of scholars in film studies in the 1970s into a new twenty-first-century interdisciplinary practice. It is a revision of previous work that failed to identify the hidden labour of women (Bell 2018, 2021, Cobb and Williams 2020, and Galt 2021). The new discourse of screen studies includes promotional screen industries (Grainge 2011, Grainge and Johnson 2015) music videos (Caston 2019, 2020), science documentary and medical television (Boon 2008, 2011), branded content (Hardy 2021), public relations (Anthony 2012), military film (Wasson and Grieveson 2018), animation (Stewart 2021), colonial film (Grieveson and MacCabe 2017, MacCabe and Grieveson 2017, Rice 2019), postproduction (Hall and Ellis 2020, Street 2019), film studios (Jacobson 2015, Street 2024), amateur film (Johnston and Frith 2022, Nicholson 2019), video and DVD (Klinger 2018, McDonald 2007), and industrial film (Russell and Taylor 2010, Scott and Mansell eds 2011).

From a BFI National Archive perspective, this journal issue is in keeping with an ongoing mission of some years now, to retrieve and present stories in the history of British moving image production from the 1890s onwards, that are not always 'caught' within the lens of academia. There are some deep-seated paradigmatic questions within this. Are these hidden areas 'industries', 'sectors' or 'supply chains'? Are they genres, sub-genres or completely different cultural forms? Into what categories should these films be entered within formal screen archives such as those of the BFI? When is a medical film a 'fiction film' and when is a 'non-fiction' work? This special issue opens questions about how we categorize screen content. An archaeological approach, adopted by several contributors to this issue, brings into question the very coherence of individualised discourses and concepts of genres. The archaeological method tends to make us look for discontinuities, so what units of assessment do we look at? How do

we evaluate the veracity of different historical sources? In what language do we discuss the interplay between these sources? It is only once its hidden screen industries have ceased to be hidden that we will have a full and accurate grasp of what filmmaking in Britain was, is, and will go on to be.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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